ALL STORIES NEW . . . NO REPRINTS

RANCH ROMANCES

25c

Now 148 Pages

SECOND AUGUST NUMBER

FEATURING:

RIVER JOURNEY WEST
By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

CHAMP'S CHOICE
By ELSA BARKER

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

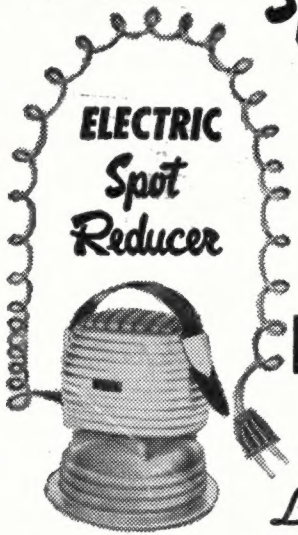
Reducing Specialist Says:

LOSE WEIGHT Where It Shows Most REDUCE MOST ANY PART OF THE BODY WITH

UNDERWRITERS LABORATORY APPROVED

Spot Reducer

Relaxing • Soothing Penetrating Massage



PLUG IN—GRASP HANDLE AND APPLY

FOR GREATEST BENEFIT IN REDUCING by massage use Spot REDUCER with or without electricity—Also used as an aid in the relief of pains for which massage is indicated.

TAKE OFF EXCESS WEIGHT!

Don't Stay FAT—You Can Lose POUNDS and INCHES SAFELY

Without Risking HEALTH

Take pounds off — keep slim and trim with Spot Reducer! Remarkable new invention which uses one of the most effective reducing methods employed by masseurs and turkish baths—MASSAGE!

LIKE a magic wand, the "Spot Reducer" obeys your every wish. Most any part of your body where it is loose and flabby, wherever you have extra weight and inches, the "Spot Reducer" can aid you in acquiring a youthful, slender and graceful figure. The beauty of this scientifically designed Reducer is that the method is so simple and easy, the results quick, sure and harmless. No exercise or strict diets. No steambaths, drugs or laxatives.

With the SPOT REDUCER you can now enjoy the benefits of RELAXING, SOOTHING massage in the privacy of your own home! Simple to use—just plug in, grasp handle and apply over most any part of the body—stomach, hips, chest, neck, thighs, arms, buttocks, etc. The relaxing, soothing massage breaks down FATTY TISSUES, tones the muscles and flesh, and the increased awakened blood circulation carries away waste fat—helps you regain and keep a firmer and more GRACEFUL FIGURE!

Your Own Private Masseur at Home

When you use the Spot Reducer, it's almost like having your own private masseur at home. It's fun reducing this way! It not only helps you reduce and keep slim—but also aids in the relief of those types of aches and pains—and tired nerves that can be helped by massage! The Spot Reducer is handsomely made of light weight aluminum and rubber and truly a beautiful invention you will be thankful you own. AC 110 volts. Underwriters laboratory approved.

MAIL THIS 10-DAY FREE TRIAL COUPON NOW!

TRY THE SPOT REDUCER 10 DAYS FREE IN YOUR OWN HOME!

Mail this coupon with only $1 for your Spot Reducer on approval. Pay postman $8.95 plus delivery—or send $9.95 (full price) and we ship postage prepaid. Use it for ten days in your own home. Then if not delighted return Spot Reducer for full purchase price refund. Don't delay! You have nothing to lose—except ugly, embarrassing, undesirable pounds of FAT. MAIL COUPON now!

ALSO USE IT FOR ACHES AND PAINS

CAN'T SLEEP

Relax with electric Spot Reducer. See how soothing its gentle massage can be. Helps you sleep when massage can be of benefit.

MUSCULAR ACHES:

A handy helper for transient relief of discomforts that can be aided by gentle, relaxing massage.

LOSE WEIGHT OR NO CHARGE

USED BY EXPERTS

Thousands have lost weight this way—in hips, abdomen, legs, arms, necks, buttocks, etc. The same method used by stage, screen and radio personalities and leading reducing salons. The Spot Reducer can be used in your spare time, in the privacy of your own room.

ORDER IT TODAY

SENT ON APPROVAL—MAIL COUPON NOW!

SPOT REDUCER CO., Dept. B-128

1025 Broad St., Newark, New Jersey

Please send me the Spot Reducer for 10 days trial period. I enclose $1. Upon arrival I will pay postman only $8.95 plus postage and handling. If not delighted I may return SPOT REDUCER within 10 days for prompt refund of full purchase price.

☐ I enclose $12.98. Send DeLuxe Model.

Name .....

Address .....

City ..... *State* .....

☐ SAVE POSTAGE — check here if you enclose $9.95 with coupon. We pay all postage and handling charges. Same money back guarantee applies. ☐ I enclose $12.98. Send DeLuxe Model.

LOSE WEIGHT OR NO CHARGE

MAYBE they're right about money growing on trees. But here's a success-proved fact: a career firmly rooted in good, practical *training* bears rich and wondrous fruit. Money, promotions, prestige, security—many of the things you really want in life.

Do you want the rewards that come from *training?* I. C. S. can help you—just as it has helped thousands of men who today are leaders in business and industry. You have over 400 courses to choose from. And the coupon brings full information. Why not mail it *today?*

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS

I. C. S. has trained 5,918,692 men and women

BOX 3970-X, SCRANTON 9, PENNA.

Without cost or obligation, please send me full particulars about the course BEFORE which I have marked X:

Business Courses
- ☐ Accounting ☐ Advertising
- ☐ Bookkeeping
- ☐ Business Administration
- ☐ Business Correspondence
- ☐ Business Law
- ☐ Certified Public Accounting
- ☐ Commercial ☐ Cost Accounting
- ☐ Federal Tax ☐ Foremanship
- ☐ High School and College
- ☐ Industrial Supervision
- ☐ Motor Traffic
- ☐ Personnel—Labor Relations
- ☐ Postal Civil Service ☐ Retailing
- ☐ Retail Business Management
- ☐ Sales Management
- ☐ Salesmanship ☐ Secretarial
- ☐ Stenography ☐ Traffic Management

Aeronautics Courses
- ☐ Aeronautical Engineer's, Jr.
- ☐ Aircraft Drafting and Design
- ☐ Aircraft Mechanic
- ☐ Engine Mechanic

Air Conditioning
- ☐ Heating
- ☐ Plumbing ☐ Refrigeration
- ☐ Refrigeration, Domestic
- ☐ Refrigeration & Air Conditioning
- ☐ Steam Fitting

Architecture
- ☐ Architectural Drafting
- ☐ Building Estimating
- ☐ Contractor's Building
- ☐ House Planning

Art Courses
- ☐ Commercial Art
- ☐ Magazine Illustrating
- ☐ Show Card and Sign Lettering

Chemical Courses
- ☐ Chemical Engineering
- ☐ Chemistry, Analytical
- ☐ Chemistry, Industrial
- ☐ Food-Plant Sanitation
- ☐ Petroleum Production & Refining
- ☐ Plastics ☐ Pulp and Paper Making

Civil Engineering
- ☐ Highway Engineering
- ☐ Reading Structural Blueprints
- ☐ Sanitary Engineering
- ☐ Structural Drafting
- ☐ Structural Engineering
- ☐ Surveying and Mapping

Communications Courses
- ☐ Telegraphy ☐ Telephony

Electrical Courses
- ☐ Electrical Drafting
- ☐ Electrical Engineering
- ☐ Electric Light and Power
- ☐ Lighting Technician
- ☐ Power House Electric
- ☐ Practical Electrician
- ☐ Practical Lineman

Diesel Engines
- ☐ Internal Combustion Engines

Mechanical Courses
- ☐ Forging ☐ Foundry Work
- ☐ Heat Treatment of Metals
- ☐ Industrial Engineering
- ☐ Industrial Instrumentation
- ☐ Industrial Metallurgy
- ☐ Machine Shop Inspection
- ☐ Mechanical Drafting
- ☐ Mechanical Engineering
- ☐ Millwrighting ☐ Mold-Loft Work
- ☐ Patternmaking—Wood, Metal
- ☐ Reading Shop Blueprints
- ☐ Sheet-Metal Drafting
- ☐ Sheet-Metal Worker
- ☐ Ship Drafting ☐ Ship Fitting
- ☐ Tool Designing ☐ Toolmaking
- ☐ Welding—Gas and Electric

Radio Courses
- ☐ Electronics
- ☐ FM and Television Servicing
- ☐ Radio, General ☐ Radio Operating
- ☐ Radio Servicing

Railroad Courses
- ☐ Car Inspector and Air Brake
- ☐ Diesel Locomotive
- ☐ Locomotive Engineer
- ☐ Locomotive Machinist
- ☐ Railroad Section Foreman

Stationary Engineering Courses
- ☐ Power Plant Engineering
- ☐ Stationary Fireman
- ☐ Stationary Steam Engineering

Textile Courses
- ☐ Cotton Manufacturing
- ☐ Designing, Finishing
- ☐ Loom Fixing ☐ Rayon Manufacturing
- ☐ Textile Engineering
- ☐ Woolen Manufacturing

Name_____ Age_____ Home Address_____

City_____ State_____ Working Hours_____ A.M. to_____ P.M.

Present Position_____ Employed by_____

Special tuition rates to members of the Armed Forces. Canadian residents send coupon to International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Ltd., Montreal, Canada.

28th Year
OF PUBLICATION

SECOND AUGUST NUMBER

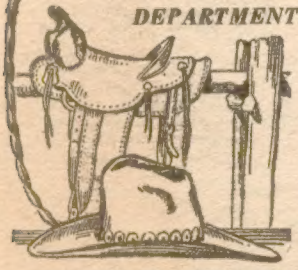
August 15, 1952
Volume 178, No. 2

RANCH ROMANCES

CONTENTS

ON SALE EVERY OTHER FRIDAY

NOVEL	RIVER JOURNEY WEST	Walker A. Tompkins	14
NOVELETTE	CAVALRY BRIDE	Hanlon Carroll	78
SHORT STORIES	CHAMP'S CHOICE	Elsa Barker	52
	A COWBOY IN TIME	Kenneth L. Sinclair	63
	FOR THE LOVE OF MR. SMITH	Beverly Darrell	73
	FAREWELL SUPPER	Seth Ranger	99
	A GIRL TO REMEMBER	W. Edmunds Claussen	104
	SQUAWMAN	Giles A. Lutz	117
SERIAL	SHEEP HEIRESS, Part 2	Frank C. Robertson	126
FEATURES	UPSTANDING CHARACTER, Verse	Limerick Luke	57
	THE BEAR FACTS	Freeman H. Hubbard	98
	THE SAGA OF JACK WILLIAMS	Harold Gluck	113
	SPUNKY NELLIE, A True Story	D. L. McDonald	114
DEPARTMENTS	OUR AIR MAIL	Our Readers	6
	TRAIL DUST		9
	RANCH FLICKER TALK Montana Territory Kirk Douglas	Beth Bright	10 12
	CROSSWORD PUZZLE		51
	KNOW YOUR WEST, a Quiz	Rattlesnake Robert	62
	WHOM SHALL I MARRY?	Professor Marcus Mari	123
	OUT OF THE CHUTES	Our Editors	124



FANNY ELLSWORTH
Editor

SINGLE COPIES, 25c YEARLY SUBSCRIPTION, $5.00

RANCH ROMANCES issued bi-weekly by Best Books, Inc., 1125 E. Vaile Ave., Kokomo, Ind. N. L. Pines, President. Entered as Second Class matter at the Post Office at Kokomo, Ind., under Act of March 3, 1879. Foreign and Canadian postage extra. Editorial and Executive Offices, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Title registered as Trade Mark in U. S. Patent Office. Copyright 1952, by Best Books, Inc. Printed in the U.S.A. The names of all persons in fiction stories in this magazine have no reference to any person, living or dead. Ranch Romances does not assume responsibility for safe return of unsolicited manuscripts.

Build a Fine Business...Full or Spare Time!

I'll Put a "Shoe Store Business" in Your Pocket!

You Don't Invest a Cent!
I Furnish Everything FREE!

Want to have lots of money in your pocket — always? Then rush the coupon below and start toward your own business. In many ways it's better than a retail store of your own! I plan to give it to you absolutely FREE. You don't invest a penny now or ever! Be in this highly profitable business QUICK.

HERE'S WHY IT'S BETTER!

As the direct factory man handling the quick-selling line of this 47-year old, million-dollar company you have a limitless market, because everybody wears shoes. Start by selling to relatives, friends, neighbors. That will prove the fine quality leathers—superb craftsmanship—money-saving value—and unequalled comfort-fit! Then branch out on a big scale.

It's easy to fit folks in the exact style they want—no need to substitute—you draw on our huge factory stock of over 175,000 pairs plus huge daily factory production.

Sales build up from friend to friend quickly, like a snowball. Recommendations, repeat orders and new customers build you a big income in a surprisingly short time. No wonder some of our top Shoe Counselors make from $5 to $10 every hour they spend taking orders!

EXCLUSIVE FEATURES

People demand nationally advertised Mason Shoes because of their exclusive comfort features, up-to-the-minute styling. Foamy-soft exclusive Velvet-Eez Air Cushion innersole makes walking a real pleasure—like "walking on air!" Ten-second demonstration lets customer actually feel air cushion, brings quick sales!

These splendid shoes bear famous Good Housekeeping Guarantee Seal.

Velvet-eez

MASON SHOE MFG. CO.
Dept. M-964, Chippewa Falls, Wisc.

BIG, STEADY PROFITS FOR YOU — NO OVERHEAD!

That's right! You have all the advantages of a profitable shoe store business without the expenses of rent, light, heat, etc. You are independent and invest nothing but your time. Your generous profit is ALL YOURS! No wonder Mason men are making more money than ever before. Even if you start in spare time, you will soon want to devote full time to this steady, repeat-order big-income business!

No Experience Needed . . . Make Money First Hour!

You need no experience to make money right away. Some men have made up to 20 sales their first day. You feature 151 styles of smart dress shoes, casual sport shoes, and practical work and service shoes for men and women, boots and fine leather jackets, too.

Sell to service station and garage men, waiters, factory workers, barbers, waitresses, nurses, housewives — everybody! Such features as Rugged Horsehide Shoes, Neoprene Oil-Resistant Soles, Gro-Cork Slip-Resistant Soles, Steel Safety Toe shoes make Mason Shoes easy to sell.

SEND NOW!

I have a powerful Selling Outfit I'm going to send you absolutely FREE as soon as I receive your coupon. This outfit includes actual 10-second demonstrator, famous Automatic Selling Plan, and features exclusive Velvet-Eez Air-Cushion shoes, fine leather jackets—other fast-selling specialties. To take advantage of this opportunity of your life, rush me the coupon below NOW! You'll be glad you did!

SEND FOR FREE OUTFIT

Mr. Ned Mason, Sales Manager
Mason Shoe Mfg. Co., Dept. M-964
Chippewa Falls, Wisc.

Please put a "Shoe Store Business" in my pocket by rushing FREE and postpaid your Powerful Selling Outfit — so I can start making Big Money my very first hour!

Name .....

Age .....

Address .....

Town ..... State .....

Transplanted GI

Dear Editor:

I am a regular reader of RANCH ROMANCES, and I hope you will publish my letter. I'm a transplanted Yankee GI who lived in Detroit, but since a death in the family, I have been living in Boytown, Texas. I am 5'8" and weigh 159 lbs. I have light brown hair and blue eyes. I enjoy all sports and all types of music except opera. I have spent most of my Army career overseas.

ARTHUR B. ADDISON
Fort Sam Houston
Texas

You're In!

Dear Editor:

How about letting an Arkansas gal into your circle. I long to write to people of all nationalities, especially people of Spanish descent, and I would also like to hear from people in Mexico. I'm 5'6" tall, have blue-gray eyes. Some people say I'm pretty but others are more frank about the matter. My hobby is collecting movie star pictures, and I love to go horseback riding. I also collect songs—hillbilly, Western and popular. And I'm learning to play a guitar.

ANNA BYRD
Route #1
Elkins, Ark.

Calling All Girls

Dear Editor:

I am a very lonesome airman who would like very much to have my name in RANCH ROMANCES. Here on Okinawa there is not much to do except write letters. Naturally, since I am a young man, I would like letters from young girls. I have been in the Air Force for two years and am spending the next two on Okinawa. I am 19 years old, 160 lbs., have light brown hair and blue eyes. Will answer all letters and exchange snaps. I am from Zanesville, Ohio, and my mother sends me RANCH ROMANCES magazines.

CPL. RAYMOND E. BESS-AF-15296233
6332nd Motor Vehicle Squadron
APO 239-1, c/o Postmaster
San Francisco, Calif.

Interested In Everything

Dear Editor:

I have dark brown hair and eyes, and I just turned 20. It's said that good things often come in small packages—well, I'm only 4'11" with a weight of around 103 lbs. Getting right down to business, letters from persons of all ages are welcome. A few of my many interests are pen pals, playing the Spanish guitar, reading, cooking, traveling, sports of all kinds, and music of all types. If any of you know Italian or Spanish, so much the better. Then we could try it on each other. Anyway, here's hoping I get pals from all over this planet.

EDNA FLOCCHINI
RT. 3, Box 479
Petaluma, Calif.

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 27 years Our Air Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Lonesome Alaskans

Dear Editor:

We, who are readers of your magazine RANCH ROMANCES, would like to have our names in the OUR AIR MAIL column. Each of us has been stationed here in Alaska for a year or more, and quite often it gets very lonesome. We will answer all letters from guys and gals far and near, and we are willing to exchange snapshots. Since regular mail is so slow we would appreciate everyone writing to us airmail. We are all between 20 and 24 and our names are: CPL. MICHAEL W. ASKEY, US-52076159; CPL. JOHN E. GEIGER, JR., US-53016846; PFC. WAYNE BORDNER, RA-15436857; PFC. ALEXANDER BETLEY, US-52108378; and PFC. JAMES E. STUBBLEFIELD, US-53097009, all in the following Company:

Headquarters & Service Co.
807th Engineer Aviation Battalion
APO 731, c/o Postmaster
Seattle, Wash.

For Further Details—

Dear Editor:

We are a couple of gals from a small town, and therefore we don't have an opportunity to meet people of our own age. So we would like to have our names on your pen pal list. Ruby is 16, has dark hair and brown eyes, is 5'4" tall, weighs 140. I am 19, have brown hair, green eyes, am 5'5" tall, weigh 145. For further details, you guys and gals, write!

RUBY HEATH
Box 135
Ringling, Mont.

JESSIE NESS
Box 83
Ringling, Mont.

Star Gazer

Dear Editor:

I have been reading RANCH ROMANCES for years and have enjoyed each issue. I am a man in my thirties, single, have a B. S. degree. Am 5'7", weigh 135 lbs. Have blue eyes, dark hair.

My interests are music, opera, outdoor theatre, psychology, astrology and physical culture. Was in World War II. Write short stories. Travel has included Paris, London, Italy, Germany, Mexico and other places of interest. All letters will be answered as soon as received.

S. J. MINTON
Valentine on Broadway Hotel
3724 Broadway
Kansas City 2, Mo.

New Friends Wanted

Dear Editor:

I lost my boy friend in Korea six months ago, and now I hope to make a lot of new friends through the OUR AIR MAIL Column. I would like to hear from servicemen and all lonely GI's. I am 20 years old, have dark brown hair and eyes, weigh 130 and stand 5'3". My hobbies are dancing, writing and receiving letters and exchanging snaps. I enjoy all kinds of Western and popular music.

MARY STEVENS
439 West 28th Street
New York, N. Y.

Anybody Anywhere

Dear Editor:

We are a couple of lonely soldiers stationed in the Far East Command, and we're wondering if we could pick up some pen pals from anywhere, any place and any age in this whole wide world. I'm 21 years old, stand 5'11" and weigh 165 lbs., have blond hair, green eyes and come from Oklahoma.

I like Western and popular music for I play a guitar and sing. I like any kind of sports and I like to dance. My hobby is writing. Nickname is Bob.

My buddy is 20 years old, stands 5'10" and weighs 150 lbs, has black curly hair and brown eyes and comes from California. He likes Western and popular music and sings too; also likes sports and is crazy about dancing. His hobby is writing. His nickname is Diego, short for San Diego, his home town. So, pen pals, how about lifting our blues for our morale is pretty low right now and there's nothing like a bunch of letters to read the whole day long. Yes sir, guys and gals, fill up those rusty old fountain pens and start heaping us up with letters.

SGT. JOSEPH R. CARRIER-R.A. 18288762
CPL. MANUEL MUNOZ-R.A. 19338296
279th General Hospital
APO 53, c/o Post Master
San Francisco, Calif.

The Cleanest, Coolest Shaves of Your Life!
Brand-New, Precision-Made A.C.
ELECTRIC RAZOR

Only $4.95
DOUBLY GUARANTEED!

TRY IT—without risking 1¢—
for 30 DAYS ON YOUR OWN BEARD!

Say "goodbye and good riddance" to old-fashioned shaving methods! Start shaving the STERLING ELECTRIC way and enjoy the cleanest, coolest, smoothest, most-comfortable shaves of your life. Toughest whiskers come off clean as a whistle . . . and FAST! The STERLING mows 'em down like magic! Yes, here's every advantage of electric shaving at an incredible low price . . . only $4.95 complete. You'll save the entire low cost in a few months in blades and shaving cream *you don't buy!* Not a toy, not a gadget. Far from it! Precision-made. Looks, handles, performs like razors costing 3, 4 and 5 times more! Look at these "expensive razor" features . .

- 4 precision shaving heads!
- Hollow-ground cutting blades!
- Blades honed in special diamond-honing compound!
- Automatic safety guide-bar.
- Powerful 60-cycle motor.
- Cutting blades chrome plated for lifetime service.
- AND MORE! Handsome white plastic case, 6 ft. extension cord, self-starting, self-sharpening, self-lubricating . . . all for the incredible low $4.95 price . . . and DOUBLY GUARANTEED!

YOU DON'T RISK A PENNY TO TRY IT!
Make us prove it! Send for the Sterling today. When it arrives use it on your own beard for 30 days. If you don't agree that the Sterling is the shaving value of all time, return it for an immediate, no-questions-asked refund. If you keep it, you're protected for ONE YEAR by our written guarantee against mechanical defect. Rush your order. Quantities limited. Send only $1.00. Pay postman $3.95 plus 70c postage on delivery. Or send $4.95 with order and we ship postage paid! LADIES—NOTE: the Sterling shaves underarms, legs smooth and fast. You'll love it!

MODERN MERCHANDISE CO.
169 W. Madison St., Dept. 636, Chicago 2, Ill.

LAW
STUDY AT HOME for Business Success and LARGER PERSONAL EARNINGS. Over 40 years expert instruction—over 114,000 students enrolled. LL.B. Degree awarded. All text material furnished. Easy payment plan. Send for FREE BOOK.
AMERICAN EXTENSION SCHOOL OF LAW
Dept. T-54 646 N. Michigan Avenue, Chicago 11, Illinois

STOP TOBACCO

Banish the craving for tobacco as thousands have with Tobacco Redeemer. Write Today for free booklet telling of injurious effect of tobacco and of a treatment which has relieved over 300,000 people.
In Business Since 1909
FREE BOOK
THE NEWELL COMPANY
153 Clayton Sta. • St. Louis 5, Mo.

MAKE EXTRA MONEY
EVERY BUSINESS EVERYWHERE USES UNION LABEL BOOK MATCHES
No experience needed to earn big daily commissions. Be a direct factory representative of the world's largest exclusive UNION LABEL Book Match manufacturer. Prospects everywhere. Feature Glamour Girls, Hillbillies, scenics and dozens of other styles—Double Books—Jumbo Books—nearly 100 color combinations. New, bigger portfolio makes this fastest selling line a real profit maker for you. Write TODAY for full details.

SUPERIOR MATCH CO.
Dept. R-952, 7528 S. Greenwood Ave., Chicago 19, Illinois
West Coast Salesmen, write Box 1087, San Jose, Calif.

DOUG CAME TO THE RESCUE AND THEN...

BOUND FOR NEW YORK CITY AFTER A WEEK'S FISHING TRIP, DOUG DAVIS WATCHES THE PILOT OF A CRASHING PLANE DRIFT INTO HEAVY TIMBER...

HE FINDS GAIL WILSON, CO-OWNER OF A NEW YORK AIR TAXI SERVICE IN A BAD SPOT.

I GO FOR THIS BLADE OF YOURS. SKIMMED 'EM OFF SLICK AS A WHISTLE!
WHISKERS DON'T COME TOO TOUGH FOR THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE REALLY KEEN!

SO YOU LIVE IN BRONXVILLE! I'VE JUST JOINED THE OAK HILLS GOLF CLUB OUT THERE
DAD IS A MEMBER, TOO. YOU MUST MEET HIM
YOU'RE HANDSOME!

ON THE LONG DRIVE BACK, GAIL AND DOUG FIND PLENTY TO TALK ABOUT.

YOU GET FAST, EASY SHAVES AT A SAVING WITH THIN GILLETTES, AMERICA'S FAVORITE LOW-PRICED BLADES. THEY OUTLAST ORDINARY BLADES 2 TO 1 AND FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY. SO FOR SHAVING COMFORT AT MINIMUM COST, ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES
THIN Gillette 10 BLADES
10-25¢
4-10¢

TEN-BLADE PACKAGE HAS COMPARTMENT FOR USED BLADES

TRAIL DUST

THIS DEPARTMENT will endeavor to cut sign on some of the colorful happenings of today's West and haze the stuff along to you—Twentieth Century trail dust, stirred up by folks in the cow country.

HERE'S ONE OF the nicest bits of news we've heard in a long time. Up in one Canadian city the humane society has been given all the town's old fireplugs. They are installed, without water, to make the new canine inmates feel at home.

WILD AND WOOLLY West department: This is just to show that occasionally we moderns have something on the old-timers. It has been established by the president of the Wyoming Wool Growers Association that the West has more antelope and deer now than it did in Indian times.

EVEN IN THE tragedies of this past spring's disastrous floods, there were some humorous aspects. Up in Bismarck, N. D., the public library got an apologetic call from a borrower who was unable to return a book, which went the way of most things in his territory, down the Big Muddy. Incidentally, the book was: "The Damned Missouri Valley."

A COUPLE OF little Western girls got the thrill that comes once in a lifetime when a locomotive actually stopped right in front of their house, and the engineer personally delivered a box of candy. This was a sort of payment to the four- and six-year-olds—for waving each time the train went by.

OUR VOTE FOR woman driver of the month goes to this Ellensburg, Wash., housewife. Her husband drove her to the State Patrol headquarters building, right where she was to take her test. Then the patrolman who gave the test sat next to her and told her to start driving. She started, but backward instead of forward—through the station's front wall, making a five-by-three foot hole in the concrete building. Unfortunately she didn't get her license. She did get a citation, though—for negligent driving.

BUT DON'T WORRY, girls. An actual driver of the month citation—for safe and courteous driving—went to a Denver, Colo., *man*. A few hours after the presentation, the police picked him up—for reckless driving.

OUT IN LA MESA, Calif., a man stopped his car when he saw $20 bills floating around in front of him. After some time he found about $1,000 worth, and a bank book that told him the owner's name. Honest man that he was, he returned them and got a reward for his time and trouble—one dollar.

THERE'S ONE lucky Westerner who registered for the draft, and then was called for a physical about six months later. In the meantime, something happened that even the U. S. Army couldn't do anything about. In that six months the boy grew an inch and a half, to 6 foot 7½ inches—and right out of the draft limit.

RANCH FLICKER TALK

Montana Territory

ROMANCE, action and a fight for justice in Columbia's Technicolor epic

YOU'D hardly think a girl would object to being called "a cute little trick," which is the phrase that invariably comes to mind in describing Wanda Hendrix. But Wanda will have none of that kind of compliment.

In the first place, she's awfully tired of references to her size. "I'm not a midget," she says. "I'm five feet two," and she'll stretch her spine to prove it.

She's determined and straightforward, too, so she doesn't like to be referred to as a trick. It's rather hard for anyone to deny that she's cute, but she's trying to change that.

"My ambition is to get away from the cute roles and the sweet little ingenues."

Columbia's *Montana Territory* gave her her wish. It's her first Western, and being a dynamo of energy, she loved all the action in it, and she loved her part of Clair Enoch, a hot-headed, rifle-toting tomboy. "What I like about Clair," said Wanda, "is that in spite of her toughness, down underneath she's all woman."

Which makes it nice for the hero, John Malvin, played by Lon McCallister, though it takes him most of the movie to discover that there's a feminine heart beating under Clair's spitfire surface.

Lon is one of the few actors in Hollywood who doesn't dwarf Wanda, since he's only 5'6" himself. Villain Preston Foster, who plays a crooked sheriff, towers over them both.

But the problem of *Montana Territory* is to get Clair and John together on the same side. John, the sheriff's deputy, is loyal to his boss, but Clair is convinced the sheriff killed her father and is the leader of a gang of bandits who are hijacking stagecoaches and murdering prospectors for their pokes.

It takes a gun battle between the bandits and the town vigilantes to show John which side is the right one. Then, at last he sides Clair in her fight for justice.

Lon McCallister and Wanda Hendrix

Preston Foster in trouble with (L to R) Myron Healey, Wanda, Lon

Like Wanda, Lon is a newcomer to Westerns. He said in fact that he feels like a newcomer to the movies—he's been away from them for so long, spending his time mainly for the last year in front of the TV cameras. All the rest of his life, though, except for the war years, was spent within a stone's throw of the studios.

He played his first part when he was 12, a bit in *Romeo and Juliet*. Seven years later he played the lead—Romeo to Katherine Cornell's Juliet in a scene in *Stage Door Canteen*. That, he says, was the biggest thrill of his life.

That part of "California," the homesick soldier, was also the biggest break in his career, but before he got a chance to capitalize on his rave notices, he became a real soldier—and probably homesick too.

After the war he was happy to find that the studios hadn't forgotten him, and he kept busy in Hollywood until he took a fling at television. That was interrupted by a rush call from Columbia for the lead in their current Technicolor epic.

"I've always been amused," Lon said, "by those newspaper stories about movie actors flying from New York to Hollywood, and then tearing straight from the plane to the set. I never believed a studio would be in such a hurry that the poor guy wouldn't have time to unpack and take a shower.

"I'm not amused any more," he added, "because that's just what happened to me."

"You have to work harder in a Western than in any other kind of movie," he tells us. "It's not merely the effort of riding a horse and the fighting, it's also the pace. All the action has to come from the actors moving fast."

It takes some doing, he admitted, just keeping up with Wanda. Lon said, "One wag on the set remarked that she was speedy enough and tiny enough to be the co-pilot of a carrier pigeon." He laughed. "But my pet nickname for her was 'Atomic Energy.' She didn't know whether to take that as a compliment or not—but anyway, she never can stay mad at you for long."

BETH BRIGHT

KIRK DOUGLAS
Strong Roles Only

THERE are six good reasons why Kirk Douglas is such a he-man. They are Ruth, Ida, Fritzie, Marion, Katherine and Betty, and they are all his sisters. He determined early in life that the preponderance of femininity in his family wasn't going to sissify him.

Wrestling was his favorite sport. His prowess on the mat won him an intercollegiate championship and also helped to pay his tuition. He did not technically become a professional wrestler, but during his summer vacations worked in carnivals, principally as a "plant," the fellow who appeared out of the audience when a cash prize was offered to anyone who could stay in the ring with the champ for a couple of rounds.

Also while he was in college (St. Lawrence University in upstate New York) Kirk became interested in acting. He won no championships in that field, but he was successful enough to make it his career.

His first part on Broadway was a long time coming. In the meantime he went to drama school and supported himself by working as a bus boy and as a punch press operator. And when the part did come, Kirk was cast as a singing messenger. The last thing he wanted to do was sing.

His second rôle wasn't much more encouraging. Then Kirk got a break, the juvenile lead in *Kiss and Tell,* which was the comedy hit of the year. But instead of taking advantage of this boost to his career, he joined the Navy and spent the next two years with an anti-submarine unit.

Kirk was wounded in the Pacific, and after several months he came back to New York. He was lucky enough to be able to pick up just about where he'd left off.

At that point he got a big assist from Lauren Bacall, whom he'd known in dramatic school, and who now suggested to producer Hal Wallis that Kirk would make a nice addition to Hollywood.

His first pictures were successful but not spectacular, and then along came *Champion.* Since then the fans can't get enough of him. Kirk doesn't care if his parts are sympathetic or not, but they must be strong.

He's a natural for Western parts. His first was *Along the Great Divide,* and he's currently appearing in Warner's *The Big Trees,* a tough, exciting story of lumber camp life.

Just looking at him you know he takes things seriously, especially his career. He's never been known to fluff a line before the cameras. He's a voracious reader of everything from whodunits to classics, and he fancies himself as a handyman around the house. However, Kirk admits with a grin that when he repairs a lamp, fuses are apt to blow all over the neighborhood.

For the seven years while Kirk was married, the Douglas household was loaded with every gadget and appliance imaginable, from garbage disposal units to garlic squeezers. He was delighted when any of his two sons' toys went out of order. "I'd fix them," he says, "and then we'd all go out and buy new ones."

In spite of his muscles, Kirk is not much of a sportsman, though he does go in occasionally for deep sea fishing. He likes to cook (using the garlic squeezer with a free hand on his specialty of shish-kebab).

He looks like a conservative dresser, but you should see his underwear!

Warner Bros.

The ladies adore him, even though he scares them half to death

MEN WERE WATCHING HER all through this perilous voyage which held violence and disaster and the promise of romance

by WALKER A. TOMPKINS

RIVER JOURNEY

DAWN WAS an incandescent shimmer along the eastern hills when the Columbia River packet *Jason Lee* sounded her five-minute warning whistle down at the Wallula wharf.

Inside the stage office, Jube Allister had delayed his appearance to the last possible minute. Seated in his homemade wheelchair, he signaled his Cayuse stable hand, Tom Buffalo, to trundle him down the office ramp and out onto the dock.

Jube's daughter Sharlott walked at his side, her face flushed with the anticipation of her first trip to The Dalles since the Chinooks had broken winter's grip on this corner of Washington Territory.

Stevedores wrestling with freight under the glare of smoky lanterns paused to stare at the girl. Sharlott had been a part of this

scene since girlhood, growing up with her father's stagecoach business, and the fact that she was dressed in feminine style for her trip to The Dalles made her an object of curiosity now, for she was more at home in jeans and buckskin.

Allister's bearded face was sour with alone. You must stop worrying yourself."

The old man did not trust himself to speak just now. He felt shamed at the way his eyes flooded over, blurring the ugly outlines of the riverboat alongside, her superstructure limned against a western sky not yet paled by the new and magnificent sun.

temper and the pain of the half-healed bullet wound in his left knee, the injury which prevented him from making this journey to his bank at The Dalles.

Each jounce of the chair over the wharf's puncheon decking made Allister's jaws grind, rimmed his skin with a cold wetness. Sharlott signaled for the Indian to halt, knowing the agony Jube was enduring and how unnecessary it was for him to see her off.

"You can see me aboard from here, Dad," the girl said decisively. "After all, I'm eighteen. I've made this trip before,

"You ain't going, Sharlie. I've changed my mind."

Jube had had a week to think over this trip, to ponder the overwhelming necessity of it, the risks his daughter might face during this river journey west. She would be bringing back ten thousand dollars in gold dust, simply because the only men he dared trust on such a mission were either dead or, like himself, laid up by ambush lead.

Sharlott bent solicitously over him, tucking the faded Hudson's Bay blanket gently around his lap. It was hard to realize she was a grown woman now, but the bottle-

green skirt and white bodice, the overall cloak and the pert aigrette hat pointed up her full-blown maturity.

"I—I can't let you do it, honey," Allister whispered huskily. "In this country a man has got to kill his own snakes. He can't send a girl—a woman—to run his errands."

Sharlott knelt beside the wheelchair, gesturing for the stolid-faced old Cayuse to move out of earshot. When the very survival of the Wallula & Idaho Stage Line was at stake, their reason for her trip could not be entrusted even to the ears of a loyal retainer like Tom Buffalo. The old Indian got talkative when he was drunk, which was a frequent occurrence.

When Tom Buffalo had moved over to the wharf stringer to peer down at the turgid green waters of the Columbia lapping against the tarred pilings, Sharlott gripped her father's gnarled hand and squeezed it, knowing the last-minute surge of doubt which was engulfing Jube's thoughts.

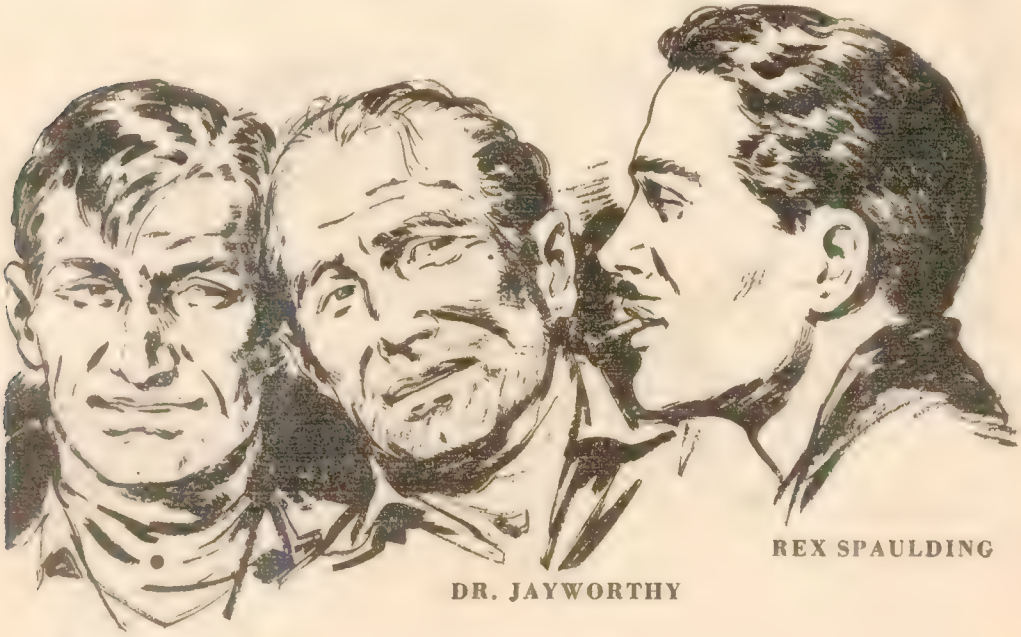
"I'll be back day after tomorrow, Dad," she reminded him. "I have a private cabin both ways. There is no possible danger at all."

THE AGONY of indecision in Jube Allister's brain blotted out the numbing pain of his knee wound. His right hand reached deep into the pocket of his plucked beaver coat to clutch the burl walnut stock of the little .47 Dimick derringer there.

He could not bring himself to hand the gun to his daughter, because that would be a tacit admission that her journey was a hazardous one, and as such unthinkable for her to undertake.

"It's no job for a female," he repeated doggedly. "I was a fool to even consider it. The new coaches ain't much worth it."

Sharlott came around in front of him, forcing him to look her square in the face. Around Wallula, forbidden to cut her hair tomboy style as she wished, Sharlott had worn her spun-copper tresses in a braided coronet that would fit under a man's hat. For this trip to The Dalles, her hair was bunned at her necknape in a glossy chignon. Her eyes were the color of a high mountain lake, blue with greenish glints, and they held an inner amusement now that added to Jube's mounting shame.



"How else could we get the gold here in time?" she reminded him patiently, having threshed this out with him a dozen times in the past three days. "If you don't have the gold to pay for those Concords, Rex Spaulding will snap them up and force us out of business. Is it because you're afraid I'll fail you, Dad?"

Jube swallowed hard, trying not to think about the disaster which Wallula & Idaho Stage Lines faced. During the past winter he had lost four of his six stagecoaches, along with irreplacable drivers and guards. The U.S. Mail franchise, without which no frontier stage line could operate profitably, would expire in four more days. The government contract demanded a minimum of six vehicles. He had the gold to replace his losses, but that gold was in the Frontier Bank at The Dalles, a hundred and fifty miles away.

"When the *Sacajawea* unloads them coaches Thursday," he said harshly, "I'll pay for 'em with that bank draft I gave you."

His daughter shook her head.

"A piece of paper with your signature on it wouldn't stand up against Rex Spaulding's ten thousand in cash, Dad, and you know it. And he's offered Willamette Freight a thousand-dollar bonus. You're lucky you've got the option on those coaches. Willamette would be happy for an excuse to break your priority."

A jet of steam blossomed from the *Jason Lee's* whistle. The thunder of it vollied off up Touchet Creek's valley, its echo thrust back by the volcanic bluffs on the west bank.

"One minute before they pull in the gangplank, Dad," the girl said, kissing him quickly on the cheek. "I'll be back on the *Sacajawea* Thursday morning, sitting in one of those stage coaches. So far as Wallula knows I'm just on a shopping trip to civilization. Now stop fussing like an old hen with one chick."

She let go his hand and stood up, and Jube Allister cursed the physical impotence that prevented him from detaining her forcibly. For sixteen of Sharlott's eighteen years he had been mother as well as father to her, and now he found his whole destiny in her hands. Without that gold to thwart Rex Spaulding's attempts to buy those Concord coaches, a lifetime's work would be wiped out.

IN THE background, smoke and sparks were pouring from the riverboat's stacks. Dock hands were casting off bow and stern lines from the wharf bitts. The boat crew was standing by, waiting for the skipper to signal from the wheelhouse to haul in the gangplank. If he could detain his daughter another minute, Jube thought, the *Jason Lee* would shove off without her.

Sharlott stooped to pick up her carpetbag and, reading her father's desperation, kept out of his reach.

"Sharlie," Jube panted. "You know it ain't your courage I'm worried about. It's knowing that Rex Spaulding may have a dozen spies on this landing, spies who'll let him know my daughter is headed downriver. And why? Spaulding wasn't born yesterday. He'll know I sent you to The Dalles to pick up that stagecoach money. He'd do anything to block me—"

She was turning away now, and Jube knew further argument was futile. His right hand came out of his mackinaw pocket and he held the derringer out to her, along with the little box of metallic .47 cartridges to fit the gun.

"You know how to use a pistol," he whispered hoarsely. "I ain't saying anything is going to happen. But this sleeve gun is easy carried in your muff. If you have to use it, aim low. A belly shot disables anything up to a bull moose. And if you got to use it, make your bullet count, the first time."

She took the little gambler's weapon from him and concealed it in her muff, with the air of an adult humoring a foolish child.

"Nothing's going to happen to your little girl," she chided him. "I'll be on the Thursday boat with those Concords, Dad. And let's see Spaulding steal our mail contract when you're operating full blast again."

Jube choked out, "The vest is your best bet, darling. God watch over you."

She was gone then, carpetbag tucked under one arm as she lifted her unaccustomed skirts and hurried through the piles of merchandise stacked on the Wallula landing.

Bells were already jangling somewhere below decks and she saw the boat captain leave the texas deck to climb into his wheelhouse. The dock hands had to hold the gangplank while she hurried aboard, so nearly had Jube succeeded in keeping her here.

She had made the downriver trip before, and thus knew the location of her cabin amidship. By the time she reached the little cubicle the pitman bars were feeding power to the *Jason Lee's* massive sternwheel and the packet was backing away from the wharf, out into the Columbia's restless flood.

She dropped carpetbag and muff on the cabin's single bunk and whisked back the greasy curtains from the single porthole. Through that opening she saw the widening expanse of water between the *Jason Lee's* hull and the landing dock not too far away.

Old Tom Buffalo was turning her father's wheelchair around for the agonizing return to the stage office where Jube had the headquarters of his stage line. Down by the waterfront she could read the garish red and yellow letters on the sign recently painted across the gable end of the warehouse which had been built during this past winter:

SPAULDING STAGE LINES—
DIRECT CONNECTION TO LEWISTON
AND THE IDAHO MINES

She doubted if her father could see her waving the scarf from the cabin porthole, but she continued to swing it to and fro until the *Jason Lee* reached midriver and yawed its blunt bow southward toward the wide bend where the river knifed into the gorge separating Washington and Oregon on its way to the sea. The boat's vibration ceased as the paddlewheel idled, and then resumed as the *Jason Lee* began its downriver run.

NOW THAT she was alone and on her way, irrevocably dedicated to this journey, Sharlott Allister felt momentarily overcome by dreads which were not worthy of anyone with old Jube's blood in her veins. In this land, no woman could be weak.

The idea had come to her a week ago when old Jube, with characteristic bluntness, had laid his cards on the table after his conference with the Willamette Freight agent.

"The four new Concords are in the warehouse in Portland and they're being shipped for delivery next week here in Wallula. That gives us a day's leeway before the federal postal inspector shows up to reject or renew our mail subsidy."

"Then our troubles are over, Dad," Sharlott had said, knowing what the new Concords meant to Wallula & Idaho.

He had shaken his head. "Freighters demand hard money on the barrelhead. And our hard money's on deposit in The Dalles bank, honey, which ain't here by a long shot. Willamette's man threw out a hint this morning, said Rex Spaulding had the ten thousand and another thousand to boot, as a persuader to snatch those coaches away from our outfit. And how in blazes am I going to make my priority order good when this game leg keeps me from going to The Dalles after our money?"

Just like that it had come to her. "I'll go, Dad," she had said, and Jube Allister's eyes had misted over, a rare thing for a man schooled to hide his emotions from her.

"You'll do no such thing, honey," Jube Allister had said. "Them riverboats aren't safe for a lone woman with that much gold. . . ."

Yet here she was. The cabin suddenly became a prison to her, a coward's refuge, and when she walked out on deck, the churning left her stomach and with it went the last vestige of her nervousness, her doubts as to her own adequacy to carry out this mission for her father. Why, this river journey was going to be fun.

Then she saw Rex Spaulding. Decked out in sand-colored beaver hat and a brown talma cape, he emerged from the gentle-

man's salon and, his eyes lifting as he touched a match to cigar, looked Sharlott straight in the face, a sham surprise in his glance.

His virile baritone voice held a cunning timbre as he greeted her. "Out for an excursion after a snowbound winter, Miss Allister? I must say civilized clothing becomes you."

She felt the insincerity of the man, knew this was no coincidental thing, his boarding the same steamer with her today.

"I'm going to shop for some dress goods, Mr. Spaulding," she said in a controlled voice. "Buckskins do get tiresome—"

He turned back into the gambling lounge, leaving her with the memory of his mocking, gold-tooth smile. Plainer than words, Spaulding had let her know he knew what lay behind her trip. . . .

The *Jason Lee* warped into her berth at Celilo Landing around mid-afternoon, between the freight boat *Sacajawea* and the fast passenger boat *Redwing*. From her cabin window, Sharlott Allister caught sight of the four red-and-yellow stages parked hub to hub on the dock, awaiting shipment upriver.

They gleamed like new toys in their pristine varnish, as bright as when Abbot & Downing had shipped them from their Massachusetts factory last fall. There was a hardwood panel running the length of each coach, paralleling the roof line.

In her mind's eye, Sharlott visualized the sign that panel would bear as soon as the four coaches were delivered to her father's wagon yard:

WALLULA & IDAHO STAGE LINES—U. S. MAIL

Celilo Landing marked the end of navigation from the upriver side of the boiling rapids which from time immemorial had been an Indian salmon-fishing grounds. Waiting at the dock was a rusty funnel-stacked railroad engine coupled to a half-dozen nondescript coaches, waiting to carry the *Jason Lee's* passengers fifteen miles west to The Dalles.

A motley crowd was on hand to greet the *Jason Lee*. Miners headed for the Orofino gold rush in Idaho; a few blue-coated troopers returning from leave to Fort Munson, up the river this side of Wallula. There was a sprinkling of bearded prospectors who had left California's declining Mother Lode camps to join this rush to Idaho. Most of them probably had booked passage on the *Sacajawea* or the *Redwing*, both boats scheduled to leave Celilo tomorrow morning at sunup.

SHARLOTT ALLISTER remained in her cabin until she saw Rex Spaulding's tall shape go down the cleated gangplank. For the hundredth time she asked herself, "Why is he aboard? Is he trailing me? Could he possibly guess why I am going to The Dalles?"

Women found Spaulding handsome, with his wax-tipped mustaches, his engaging smile, his immaculate dress in a land of roughly dressed men. But to Sharlott, believing with her father that Rex Spaulding's hand had been behind all the misfortune which had struck the Wallula & Idaho Stage Line during the past winter, Spaulding had become the very personification of evil.

"Any one of a hundred legitimate things could have brought him down the river today,"" she tried to assure herself. "If Dad had known he was aboard this morning he would be frantic—"

She watched Spaulding join the milling throngs at the foot of the gangplank, a tall figure in beaver hat and immaculate fustian coat covered by a talma cape.

She saw him turn to size up the four shining Concord stages which were waiting to be taken aboard the *Sacajawea*. Jube had insisted that Spaulding would resort to any extreme to prevent those stages becoming the property of Wallula & Idaho. Even murder. Yes, it was a good thing Jube Allister was unaware that Rex Spaulding was her fellow passenger on the *Jason Lee* today.

Waiting until Spaulding had disappeared in the last coach of the waiting train, Sharlott hurried off the steamer and found herself a place in the first coach behind the engine.

As the little train began its hour-long

run down the Oregon riverbank toward The Dalles, Sharlott found herself thinking back to the time Rex Spaulding had first appeared in Wallula, a year and a half ago, to set up a competing stage line.

At that time her father's stage line had been hard-pressed to accommodate the rush of passenger business bound for Walla Walla and Lewiston. He had not resented Spaulding's competition; he had actually welcomed it. For he knew Spaulding's coaches would take care of the surplus passenger traffic to Idaho.

When the gold rush petered out, Spaulding would find himself faced with depleted revenues and increasing operational costs. This part of the frontier could not support two stage lines, and Allister, first on the scene, had built his business on a solid foundation, subsidized by the government mail contract as insurance against a decline in passenger-hauling profits.

"Spaulding's a flash in the pan." Allister had thus shrugged off his competition. "This gold rush is already showing signs of petering out, and then you'll see Spaulding start losing money. He's got to have the government mail and express business to make any money in this unsettled country. And as long as we keep operating to Uncle Sam's satisfaction, we got a corner on the federal subsidy."

Last summer and fall, there had been plenty of passenger business for a dozen stage lines. But it was during the rough winter weather that tragedy had begun to strike Jube Allister's stage line.

He had lost his first coach when fire of undetermined origin had destroyed a Snake River ferry in October. In November, two of his drivers had been knocked out of the box by holdup men, ostensibly after the treasure box they carried in the boot.

During the January blizzards, when Spaulding's stages stopped running entirely and Wallula & Idaho were lucky to keep one outfit on the road at a time, three of his stages had disappeared. Jube Allister, braving the snowdrifts alone on horseback, had tracked down his coaches, one by one.

He found his drivers bullet-riddled and scalped, his dead teams bristling with feathered arrows. Indian renegades on a rampage, the evidence said, and Jube Allister had hushed his daughter when Sharlott had suggested that Rex Spaulding's whisky might have prompted the Indians to ambush his Concords.

Then, this spring, Jube himself had been lucky to escape with his life on an overnight run to Walla Walla, when gunmen had opened fire on his coach from the Touchet Creek wallowbrake. His shotgun guard had taken a bullet in the brain and the doctor who had fished a leaden pellet out of Jube's kneecap had had tough going to save Jube's leg.

Whatever the cause for the reign of bad luck, Jube Allister was facing this summer's business rush with only two operating stages where six were the minimum required to keep his mail franchise secure. That government subsidy was what Spaulding was after.

LEAVING the boat train at The Dalles, Sharlott found herself swept up in another throng of miners and Indians, soldiers down from the fort on the hill overlooking town, freighters and farmers and overland emigrants.

The Dalles was booming, with river traffic up from Portland at an all-time high and hundreds of gold-seekers arriving daily by the western portage.

Sharlott realized now how fortunate she had been that the booking agent in Wallula had been able to reserve one of the two cabins on the *Sacajawea* for tomorrow's return voyage upriver. In a locked cabin, she and the gold would be safe.

A surrey marked *River House Hotel* was on hand to meet the boat train, and Sharlott was reminded that she had given Jube her promise to spend the night at that hostelry, one which catered to a more genteel trade than the general run of flophouses in The Dalles.

But she would be leaving before daylight tomorrow, and it was essential that she visit her father's bank first of all and withdraw the gold dust. Much as she yearned to shop in the city's mercantile and millinery stores, Sharlott crowded vanity out of her thoughts

and headed straightaway for the Frontier Bank.

She reached the bank without catching any sight of Rex Spaulding in the street throngs. The bank was bustling with patrons and it was a full forty minutes before she had worked her way to a cashier's wicket.

Her heart was pounding wildly as she opened her reticule and drew out the envelope containing the bank draft which her father had given her before daylight this morning. She handed over the envelope,

Volmer's eyes held a wicked glitter as he stepped around to face Russ Owens

Mr. Fosberg, the teller, remembered her from previous visits to the town and engaged in mildly flirtatious small talk while he broke the red wax seals. Reading the text of Jube's letter, the color left Fosberg's narrow face and he glanced up to stare at her under the green cowl of his eyeshade.

"Uh—this is an extraordinary matter, Miss Allister," he said in a flustered voice. "You'll have to see Mr. Wassum about it."

He unlocked a door to his cage and conducted her to the office of the bank president, Gideon Wassum, one of her father's oldest friends. It was Jube's loyalty to Wassum that accounted for him banking in The Dalles instead of Walla Walla.

Wassum was a fat, white-bearded man who had always reminded Sharlott of Santa Claus, but his customary jocularity faded when he read the letter Fosberg handed him.

"This is fantastic, Sharlott," the banker said with hollow humor. "There must be some mistake. Do you realize how much ten thousand dollars' worth of gold dust would weigh?"

Fosberg left the private office as Sharlott was saying, "At twenty dollars the troy ounce, the sum would add up to a trifle over forty-one pounds, Dad said."

Wassum nodded. "And you have no bodyguard with you, no one to carry such a load?"

"I believe Dad's letter explained why it was impossible for him to come, Mr. Wassum. As for the weight—I juggle mail sacks twice that heavy, every time a stage comes in. Besides, I'm not hiking back to Wallula afoot, you know."

Gideon Wassum took off his steel-rimmed spectacles and polished them industriously. His customarily tranquil face was flushed and hot.

"But—but Sharlott—is Jube insane? I can't let you walk out of this bank with over forty pounds of gold in your possession. Not when men are being knifed in the back for the price of a shot of whisky."

Sharlott said adamantly, "Concord stagecoaches cost $2,500 apiece delivered in Wallula, Mr. Wassum. Without those coaches, Dad stands to lose his stage line. There's no other way out."

FOSBERG came into the office and dropped a slip of ruled paper on the banker's desk. Scanning it, Wassum said with an embarrassed cough, "A withdrawal of this size would leave your father with less than a hundred dollars in the bank, my dear."

Sharlott Allister closed her eyes tight and

her mouth took on quite a stubborn set.

"Please, Mr. Wassum. The draft is in order, is it not? My father has enough dust on deposit to cover the withdrawal?"

With a heavy sigh, Wassum turned to his cashier. "I have no choice, John. Weigh out the dust."

Sharlott handed Mr. Fosberg her carpet bag. "Put the pokes in this," she said.

When Wassum had made out the necessary papers for the girl's signature, Fosberg returned from a visit to the vault and let Sharlott's carpetbag thump heavily on the desk.

"You are stopping at the River House?" the teller inquired. "I will give you an armed escort to the hotel. And I strongly advise you to deposit this dust in the River House safe until the boat train's departure tomorrow morning."

Sharlott shook hands with the two men and picked up the carpetbag. She was amazed at its weight, although the gold-laden sacks it contained made no visible bulge in the exterior appearance of the carpetbag.

"An armed bank messenger marching me up to the hotel would be a dead giveaway that I was carrying valuables," she pointed out. "Please don't worry about me. Surely The Dalles is not so wild a woman is not safe on its streets in broad daylight."

To avoid the possibility of having Rex Spaulding spot her leaving the bank, she had Wassum unlock the rear alley door. Crossing that alley, she entered an adjacent mercantile building and, after an interval of desultory shopping for thread and sundry notions, she made her way out on the street through the mercantile's front door.

The street was crowded with wagons loaded with lumber and freight portaged up from below the cascades of the Columbia. Three times in the short block between the bank and the foot of the River House stairway, bearded strangers accosted her with courteous offers to assist her with her burden.

Starting up the hillside flight of steps, she wondered if men could tell how heavy the carpetbag was. The hotel was built a hundred feet above the street level and the wooden stairs were broken every few yards by a terraced landing.

She was breathing hard when she reached the second landing. A tall young man in a miner's wool shirt and a California-style sombrero was pausing there to light up a pipe. A leather telescope bag at his feet indicated that he was likewise heading for the hotel in search of lodgings.

The man inquired courteously, "Give you a hand with that bag, lady?"

She shook her head, feeling an unreasonable terror at the prospect of letting the carpetbag leave her possession even for a moment. Then a sharp strike of boots coming up the stairs behind her made Sharlott glance over her shoulder.

Rex Spaulding was striding up the slope below, the sun bright on his gold-toothed smile. He must have seen me go into the bank, she thought wildly. If he hefted my bag he would guess why it's so heavy—and he's sure to want to help me.

Sharlott turned to meet the stranger's questioning eyes.

"Thank you," she panted. "I appreciate your courtesy."

The tall young man took the carpetbag from her, surprise crossing his face as his shoulder sagged under its unexpected weight.

"I declare," he said in a laughing voice that carried a nasal Missouri twang in it, "what do you women pack in your overnight bags these days? Feels like an anvil. Or is it gold bricks for the new mint I understand the government is going to build here in The Dalles?"

SHE KNEW by the solid tread of Rex Spaulding's boots on the warped plank steps that he was matching their climb up to the broad veranda of the River House, making no attempt to overtake her. Had he overheard the young man's remark about her bag?

Vaguely Sharlott was aware that the tall young man at her side had introduced himself, but the name escaped her ear. With an effort she lifted her face toward his, concentrated on what he was saying.

"—claim petered out in Hornitos, so I

thought I'd have a fling at the Idaho diggings. Practically strapped me, bribing the agents of the *Sacajawea* to give me deck passage on the upriver voyage tomorrow. I was half in the notion to strike out overland afoot—"

They entered the lobby of the River House, the young man heading directly to the reception clerk's counter. In the blistered mirror behind the counter she saw Spaulding shoulder through the hotel doors, and relief flooded through her as he paused to chat with an acquaintance.

She thanked her benefactor, identified herself to the clerk and accepted the key he took from a rack at his elbow. When she went to sign the register, her hand shook as if from the ague, and only then did she realize the pressure she had been under.

A Negro bellboy had taken her carpetbag and the key. As she moved toward the carpeted stairs leading to the second floor of the hostelry, she glanced back to see the young miner from California staring after her.

She heard him say to the clerk, "You told me three days ago that Room 22 would be available for me tonight. I've got perty tired sleeping in that waterfront stable."

At the head of the stairs she turned for a quick glance into the lobby below and saw that Rex Spaulding was still conversing with a group of men near the front entrance.

The bellboy unlocked the door of Room 24 and stood aside as she entered a boxlike room with a single window overlooking downtown and the river. The room smelled of tobacco and liquor and unaired bedding, and she was relieved when the bellboy, without being asked, opened the window and propped it up with a stick of wood to let in the sweet Oregon breeze, mixed with the odor of conifers and street dust and the river.

She tipped the bellboy, impressing on him the necessity for being awakened at three o'clock tomorrow morning, in time to catch the boat train which made connections with the *Sacajawea* at Celilo.

"Lots of guests in the house gwine catch that train, ma'am," the bellboy reassured her. "I'll make certain you gits up in time for breakfast, ma'am."

AFTER he'd left, she locked and bolted the door behind him, thinking that with Spaulding stopping in this same hotel, her nerves wouldn't let her get a wink of sleep.

Hoisting the carpetbag to the bed, she dumped its contents. The gold dust was packed in eight identical buckskin pokes, plump as sausages.

She had brought with her only the essentials for this overnight stay, together with a beaded buckskin vest of Umatilla Indian manufacture. The vest belonged to old Jube, and was equipped on the inner side with a series of pockets like a money-belt. A loose-fitting garment, fastened with horn buttons and rawhide frogs, its compartments could be filled with the gold sacks without distorting its shape on the wearer.

Sharlott busied herself transferring the eight pokes to the vest pockets now. Stripping off her traveling coat, she donned the vest, and was astonished to find that the forty-odd pounds of yellow treasure was so evenly distributed as to be easily carried. This idea of her father's was a good one.

When her coat was donned over the vest, Sharlott scanned herself in the washstand mirror. Her shoulders were erect, her figure not too lumpy. No one seeing her tomorrow would suspect the weighty burden she was carrying.

I'm getting as silly as Dad, she chided herself. No one knows about this gold anyway. Get a grip on yourself, gal!

Back home, when her worried father had suggested using the Umatilla vest as a means of carrying the gold pokes without attracting attention, Sharlott had agreed to the plan to humor him.

Now her imagination was working overtime. She could not shake off a conviction that the man most concerned with intercepting this treasure—not for its intrinsic value so much as for what it represented to her father's rival stage line—was fully aware that she had visited the Frontier Bank and knew the contents of her carpetbag.

In that event, it would be too risky to keep the gold in her room overnight. She reminded herself that two other persons knew how heavy the carpetbag had been—the friendly Californian and the bellboy. Her secret was thus not entirely her own.

In all probability Spaulding was still in the lobby. If she could be seen depositing her carpetbag in the hotel safe—while the gold remained secure in her own possession—there would be no possibility of any attempt to rob her.

The ruse struck her as practical, and she set about putting her plan into being. She found a ten-pound doorstop in the shape of a miniature anvil, and stowed it in the carpetbag. The only other weighty object to meet her eye was the bronze bust of a war-bonneted Indian chief forming an ornament on a walnut highboy.

She wrapped the Indianhead statue in a pillowslip and placed it in the bag with the anvil. The bag, when hefted, was sufficiently heavy to suit her purpose.

"I'm imagining things," she told herself sheepishly. "But Spaulding might have heard that man joking me about how heavy my luggage was, down on the stairs."

At six o'clock, a porter patrolled the outer hall with a dinner gong, informing guests of the evening meal in the dining hall downstairs. Wearing her outer coat over the gold-laden vest, Sharlott Allister made her way down to the lobby, toting the carpetbag.

REX SPAULDING was at the reception desk, rattling dice in a leather cup as he played some kind of a gambling game with the bored attendant.

Glancing around just at the time that Sharlott hoisted her carpetbag to the counter top, he doffed his beaver hat and said with a bantering indifference, "A sensible precaution, Miss Allister. I confess I was a bit concerned, wondering if you would leave your baggage in your room while you dined."

Sharlott met the level strike of his dark eyes without changing expression.

"I beg your pardon?"

He prodded the carpetbag with his palm.

"Those gold bricks the young man was joshing you about. I assume you are depositing them in the management's vault for the duration of your, uh, shopping tour?"

Sharlott felt the color rising in her cheeks. So he overheard what the stranger said when he lifted my bag, she thought. Which is exactly why I fixed up this dummy.

"Merely some ore specimens a customer of Daddy's wanted assayed here in The Dalles," she lied smoothly, knowing Spaulding would not believe her.

She turned to the clerk and said, "Please deposit this in your safe until I call for it. Miss Allister, Room 24."

Spaulding's dark eyes followed the clerk as he stowed the weighty carpetbag in the square iron safe built in the wall of the reception cubicle, wrote her out a receipt, and handed her the stub to match the tag he had affixed to the bag.

"A pity," Rex Spaulding observed, "that your father burdened you with a bag full of rocks when there are so many competent assayers in Wallula. Or did his customer want to keep a bonanza from becoming common news that close to the diggings?"

Sharlott placed the receipts in her reticule, tugged the drawstring tight and eyed him with an indifferent smile.

"My father's business," she said, "was with his customer. It was no inconvenience to me, I assure you."

Spaulding bowed with a mock gravity. "*Touché*. And no business of mine, obviously. May I ask how long you intend to remain in The Dalles? There is to be a dance up at the cavalry post this coming Saturday. I should be honored if—"

"Thank you, no, Mr. Spaulding," Sharlott said. "I did not bring suitable attire for a social event."

She had hoped to leave him with the impression that her stay here would be of several days' duration, for if Spaulding was trying to pry out information that had any bearing on her father's intended purchase of the four stagecoaches he had seen at Celilo, a prolonged visit here in the Oregon settlement would put him off the track.

The hotel clerk, however, scotched that

plan with what was, for him, a perfectly innocent remark.

"I understand you wish to be awakened in time to catch the *Sacajawea* tomorrow morning, Miss Allister?"

Sharlott saw the roused interest in Spaulding's eyes, the barely perceptible twitch of his mouth corners as he waited for her answer.

"Yes—that is right. I understand the train leaves before daylight. I could easily oversleep."

The hotel clerk nodded. As she was turning away from the counter, the man called after her apologetically, "Begging your pardon, ma'am, but I overheard you telling Mr. Spaulding here that you intend to have some mineral specimens assayed. If that is the case, you won't have time tomorrow—"

Sharlott said stiffly, "I will make arrangements for the ore to be picked up, sir. But thank you."

Entering the dining room, she left instructions for her evening meal to be sent up to her room, realizing that it would make her conspicuous if she did not remove her outer cloak while dining.

On her way back through the lobby, she saw that Spaulding had joined a group of poker players who had assembled around a table in a far corner of the room. The reception desk was vacant at the moment and she stepped quickly to it for a look at the hotel register.

Picking out her own signature on the page, she read the one directly below it, the one she knew belonged to the young man from California who had assisted her on the steep hillside stairs earlier this evening.

Russell Owens, Frankford, Mo.—Hornitos, Calif.

Rolling the name over her tongue, Sharlott made her way back to her room, glad to shed the heavy coat. She removed the gold-laden buckskin vest and tucked it between the mattress and the hemp-rope bedsprings. By the time she had tidied up at the washstand, a dining hall porter had arrived with her supper tray.

[*Turn page*]

oh-oh, Dry Scalp!
"SAM'S nice, but he'd be a lot nicer if he did something about that Dry Scalp! His hair is dull and unruly—and he has loose dandruff, too! I've got just the ticket for him—'Vaseline' Hair Tonic!"
Hair looks better... scalp feels better... when you check Dry Scalp
IT'S EASIER than you think! 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic checks Dry Scalp . . . makes a world of difference in the good looks of your hair. It's ideal with massage before shampooing, too. Contains no alcohol or other drying ingredients. It's double care . . . for both scalp and hair . . . and it's economical.
Vaseline HAIR TONIC
TRADE MARK ®
Listen to DR. CHRISTIAN, starring JEAN HERSHOLT, on CBS Wednesday nights.
VASELINE is the registered trade mark of the Chesebrough Mfg. Co., Cons'd

LATER she lay under the blankets, letting the tensions of the past twenty-four hours drain from her body. Through the open window she could hear the night sounds, so utterly foreign to her ears, accustomed to the solitude that was Wallula. The frog-throated tones of riverboat whistles, the cursing of stevedores busy loading freight on the riverfront, the jangle of music from a honkytonk, the endless drum of hoofs and wheels on The Dalles' streets.

But sleep would not come. Rex Spaulding, in none too subtle fashion, must have convinced himself that she had deposited something valuable in the hotel safe overnight. It was apparent that her father's rival for the inland stage business must have guessed her mission downriver.

In that event, she could expect some attempt to be made to prevent her gold dust reaching Wallula tomorrow. Not by any direct assault from Spaulding himself; that would be too gauche for a man of his breed.

"I'll lock myself up in the boat cabin for the whole journey back," she told herself. "If some hoodlum snatches my carpetbag when I debark at Wallula, let him. Dad's stagecoaches and the mail contract will be safe by then."

She was unaware of drifting off to sleep until she was roused by a hammering on her locked door and a man's voice intoning, "Three o'clock, lady. Your train leaves in one hour."

By lamplight, shivering in the cold of an early Oregon morning, Sharlott Allister dressed, shrugged into the gold-weighted buckskin vest. She put her traveling coat over that.

Breakfast was being served for other early-rising riverboat passengers like herself, and while Sharlott was waiting at one of the tables to be served, she saw Russell Owens enter the dining room and glance around in search of a vacant chair.

Catching the young Missourian's eye, Sharlott indicated the chair opposite her own, and Owens came toward her immediately. His sun-bronzed face was grave as he seated himself.

"I find myself a pauper this morning, Miss Allister. You heard what happened during the night, I presume?"

A swift prescience of alarm struck the girl as she shook her head.

"Masked thug blackjacked the night clerk some time after midnight when the lobby was deserted. Whoever did the foul deed looted the hotel safe. Cleaned out all the valuables the hotel management had deposited for its guests. Including a poke of dust belonging to yours truly."

THE CHALKY hue of her cheeks revealed the impact Owens's news had made on her. The young Missourian said solicitously, "I'm sorry if I disturbed you, ma'am. Obviously you hadn't heard. Did—did you lose anything, too?"

She shook her head, her brain spinning. "Is—how badly was the clerk hurt? Will he live?"

Owens grinned. "He's up and around. There's talk that he might have been in on the deal. At least the clerk can't give much of a description of his attacker, other than that the robber was dressed in miner's clothes, was about five feet ten and wore a bandanna over his face. He was slugged with a quirt handle right after the robber made him open the safe."

Sharlott was only vaguely aware of Owens ordering their coffee and eggs. The robber was five feet ten? Then it couldn't have been Spaulding. A thug in his hire? That would depend on whether her carpetbag with its worthless contents had been the robber's primary objective in looting the hotel safe.

She felt an overpowering rush of thanksgiving that the night clerk had not been murdered. Otherwise she would have felt indirectly responsible for the tragedy. Her every instinct told her that Rex Spaulding was behind the night's violence.

"My only tangible assets," Owens was saying with an easy nonchalance, "are my steamer ticket for the *Sacajawea* this morning as far as Lewiston, my health, my sense of humor, and enough pocket change to treat you to this coffee, Miss Allister."

She pulled herself together with an effort. "You know my name?"

Owens's eyes twinkled impishly over the rim of his thick china coffeecup.

"You signed the hotel book just ahead of me, remember?"

His happy-go-lucky acceptance of a loss that she knew must have been considerable made it impossible for Sharlott to be reserved before this man. With his sombrero off, she saw that his hair was glossy black and thickly curled, his skin clay-blue where the roots of a black beard showed through. He could not be over twenty-five, she judged—an average age for the Argonaut breed.

"I also learned," Owens said, "that you live in Wallula, that your father runs a stagecoaching business, that you are as yet unmarried—which is a minor miracle in this country where beautiful women are at a premium."

Sharlott laughed in spite of herself. "Did I write my autobiography in that hotel register yesterday, Mr. Owens?"

The Missourian shrugged. "Desk clerks are talkative."

"And Missourians must be good listeners."

Their conversation was interrupted by a page boy's announcement that the *Sacajawea* boat train was leaving in fifteen minutes. Joining the exodus of passengers out to the waiting surrey, Owens said jokingly, "You've forgotten your bag of goldbricks."

She lifted her velvet reticule. "This and my muff are my luggage, sir. I travel light. It's a Western habit."

Later, on the train, Owens said boyishly, "I wish you'd call me Russ. I'm not so old I rate a mister or a sir. I might as well admit—my last birthday was my twenty-first."

Rex Spaulding had not been aboard the hotel's surrey, nor did Sharlott see him leave the boat train at Celilo Landing. At the *Sacajawea's* gangplank she was parted from Owens, whose ticket called for deck space only, while a steward escorted her to her starboard cabin under the texas deck.

"We only have two ladies aboard this run," the steward told her. "Other one is an old woman about ninety, in the port cabin. Take my advice and stay off the deck. Too many roughnecks and soldiers aboard. We may be in for a snowstorm before noon anyway."

She had promised Russ Owens to join him on deck after it got daylight, and she felt a twinge of regret now at her impulsive acceptance of his invitation. What power did the young adventurer have to stir her senses so? After all, he was a complete stranger.

Sharlott had not lacked for male attention, even in Wallula. There was a lieutenant from Walla Walla's army post who wanted to marry her. She had had other proposals, even when she'd been as young as sixteen. Yet no man had roused her as this virtual stranger had.

WHEN THE *Sacajawea* was under way, a little sliver touched Sharlott's spine as she realized that somewhere back at The Dalles, the unknown thug who had bludgeoned a hotel clerk and looted the River House safe might at this very moment be puzzling over the miniature cast-iron anvil and the bronze Indian head which her carpetbag had contained.

Looking back on it, she realized that she had planted that decoy bag in the hotel safe deliberately, for her own protection against a possible robbery attempt in her room.

Now the safe robber—if her gold dust had been his objective—knew that he had been tricked. Carrying the thought farther, if her gold was the target of his robbery, the thief must know that she had carried the treasure with her onto the *Sacajawea.*

The sense of free-breathing security which she had brought into this cabin left her now. If Spaulding has guessed my secret, she told herself, he'll resort to any extreme to keep me from reaching Wallula with Dad's gold. . . .

The steamer was bucking the heavy current out in mid-Columbia now, crawling at a snail's pace in the teeth of the spring flood. Dawn was a cerise pulse over the remote Blue Mountains to eastward; the Oregon hills off the *Sacajawea's* starboard beam were beginning to take definite shape.

A knock sounded on her cabin door, and

a voice came through the heavy panels, "Purser, ma'am. Ticket, please."

She unbolted the door to admit the steamer official. He had a clip board with the passenger list and as he took her ticket and checked her name off the list, she found herself inquiring, "Is a Mr. Rex Spaulding aboard this run, sir?"

The purser flipped over the pages of his manifest, ran his eye down the list of S's by lantern light, and shook his head.

"Rex ain't aboard, miss. As a matter of fact, I played cards in a game with him last night and I remember he said he was in The Dalles to buy some teams of horses for some new stagecoaches he had ordered. That'll take him several days."

As the purser turned to leave, Sharlott caught his arm.

"Please don't think I am overly inquisitive, but where was this card game Mr. Spaulding was in? The River House?"

The purser eyed her queerly. It was obvious from his sly smirk that he had taken her for one of Spaulding's paramours.

"It was at the Golden Eagle Saloon, lady. And he was not with a woman, if that's what's bothering you."

Sharlott curbed her swift anger, knowing she could not protest the man's insolence under the circumstances.

"I—I am merely wondering why Mr. Spaulding did not return to the hotel last night."

The purser grinned, assuming the worst now. "Good reason, Miss Allister. We played poker from nine o'clock last night till the crack of dawn." His eyes ran over her. "Spaulding won considerable. But if I'd been in his shoes, I wouldn't of kept you wondering where he was for all the blue chips in The Dalles."

SHARLOTT slammed the door angrily in his face and, after bolting it, slumped down on the cabin's single bunk, scarlet with shame and outrage.

But at least she had confirmed Spaulding's whereabouts at the time of the hotel robbery.

She thought back to the purser's reference to Spaulding's purpose for being in The Dalles, buying stage horses. That could only mean he was sure that Jube Allister would not have the money to buy the four Concords when his option expired tomorrow.

If Spaulding had been behind last night's safe robbery, it was obvious that he had hired someone to do his dirty work.

Quite unbidden, a devastating thought exploded in her head.

Russell Owens and his joke about her gold bricks—what if that handsome young prospector had slugged the River House clerk?

What, after all, did she know about him, other than that he had an air of gentility about him, a pair of penetrating blue eyes, and a smile that oddly disturbed her senses? Why had her womanly instincts been so willing to respond to his subtle masculine charm, imbuing him with a depth of character which might only be a surface sham?

One thought bred another, equally unnerving. Had it been mere chance that had caused Russ Owens to be waiting on the River House stairs yesterday afternoon, to offer to carry her bag? What if Owens was in Rex Spaulding's hire? She had no proof other than Owens's casual reference to having recently come up from California, headed for the Orofino mines.

She forced herself to relax. No possible harm could come to her on this return journey as long as she remained locked in this cabin. Tomorrow morning, when the *Sacajawea* docked at Wallula, she knew her father would be waiting for her at the foot of the gangplank, probably toting his formidable Sharps rifle. Then this ordeal—even though it might be entirely a product of her overwrought imagination—would be forever behind her. . . .

Bucking a silt-laden river current, swollen with the flood of thawing snows further inland, the *Sacajawea* barely seemed to make headway. An hour after sunrise, Russ Owens knocked on the cabin door and called her name in his rollicking Missouri drawl.

She kept utterly still, her fingers closing over the burl walnut stock of her father's derringer when she saw the doorknob twist

under Owens's hand. Then, after a pause, she heard the prospector's hobbed boots moving away, saw the flash of his shadow darken the porthole curtains.

He would either assume she was asleep or had left the cabin and locked it behind her. Or had he been seeking entry to her compartment for grimmer motives? She hugged her arms hard against the Umatilla vest, comforted by the solid shapes of the gold dust sacks inside the garment.

AT TEN O'CLOCK the *Sacajawea* nosed in at a woodchopper's dock on the Washington side of the river and wasted an hour loading firewood for her engines. Then the packet resumed its plodding passage up the turgid Columbia, her stern paddlewheel fighting for every yard of headway.

Hunger began to assault Sharlott's stomach when the noon hour came and passed. Anger touched her, anger at being trapped in this ill-ventilated prison cell. If Russell Owens was a thug bent on robbing her, he would hardly dare accost her on the crowded deck.

She had a half-formed decision to visit the steamer's dining salon aft, when another knock sounded on her door and she heard Russ Owens call softly, "Are you all right, Miss Allister? You forget you were going to point out landmarks for me?"

Sharlott held her breath, her back to the heavy door panels, until the young miner had left once more. Then, her hunger getting the better of her, she unbolted the door and went outside. Owens was nowhere in sight.

Some excitement had drawn the *Sacajawea's* passengers to the starboard railing, so that Sharlott reached the dining salon without difficulty. A mess steward informed her that a rival steamer belonging to the *Sacajawea's* owners, was overhauling the sternwheeler astern.

"It's no race, ma'am." The steward laughed. "The *Redwing* was built for speed. She left Celilo a couple of hours after we did and she'll dock in Lewiston and unload and meet us on the way back, up around Starbuck on the Snake."

Bolting down her food, Sharlott left the dining salon in time to see the sleek *Redwing* show her stern to the plodding *Sacajawea*. She caught a glimpse of Russ Owens in the crowd of roughnecks on the foredeck, and saw that her father's four stagecoaches were now serving as grandstands for the lucky passengers who had climbed aboard their roofs.

Back in her cabin, Sharlott felt better. She waited out an hour, and then went outside once more, finding a secluded niche on the starboard rail between two canvas-shrouded lifeboats. Lowering clouds promised a rainstorm soon.

The *Sacajawea* was quartering toward the Oregon shore now, presumably heading for an obscure landing dock which she identified as Doan's, a tiny settlement consisting of a few scattered shacks near the mouth of the John Day Canyon.

Ordinarily, riverboats of the *Sacajawea's* draft did not put in at Doan's. Now, with the Columbia in spring flood, it appeared that an altogether unscheduled stop was being made.

Sharlott started violently as she heard a brushing sound on the canvas boat tarpaulin behind her, and she spun about to see a stocky-built youth in a stocking cap worming his way between the lifeboats to join her.

She relaxed at once, recognizing him as one of the boat's crew whom she had often seen polishing brass and swabbing decks when the *Sacajawea* was tied up at the Wallula wharf.

"Do you make a practice of stopping at Doan?" she asked the young dockhand calmly.

The man gestured with a hairy forearm toward the landing.

"See that red flag flying from the jackstaff on Doan's warehouse?" he asked. "Emergency signal. Looks like it went up after the *Redwing* passed the landing, otherwise she'd of been honor bound to pull in and find out what's up."

Sharlott eyed the nearing wharf with a fresh interest, spotting the scrap of red flannel fluttering in the breeze from a rooftop flagpole.

WHEN THE river steamer eased alongside the wharf, Sharlott saw a buffalo-coated oldster waiting at the wharfhead. At his feet was a blanket-shrouded figure of a bearded man, stretched out on an improvised stretcher made from a warehouse door.

"Sick man, reckon," the dockhand commented. "Feller in the buffler coat is Doc Jayworthy. Runs the saloon at Doan's. Renegades get their gunshot wounds patched up by Doc. Talk is that Jayworthy's on the shady side of the law hisself."

From the wheelhouse of the *Sacajawea* came the booming voice of the steamer's skipper amplified by a megaphone. "Anything wrong, Doc?"

Sharlott saw Jayworthy's bead-bright eyes squinting up at the faces lining the *Sacajawea's* railing.

"Got a mulewhacker here with a broke laig. Gangrene's setting in and I got to git him to the surgeon at Fort Munson. Ain't got the facilities for an amputation at my saloon."

Sharlott put a hand to her lips to stifle the moan of sympathy which welled up in her throat. The *Sacajawea* had come to a stop now and a gangplank was being run over the side to the dock stringers below.

From her position at the railing, Sharlott could look down at the injured mulewhacker. He was young, she saw, with a scrub of beard fuzzing his jaws. His eyes were squeezed shut.

Remembering her father's near escape from losing a leg, she felt a motherly sympathy for the writhing man on the litter down there. Fort Munson was on the Oregon side of the river, some fifty miles upstream. Doc Jayworthy's patient faced the loss of a leg when they reached the military hospital at Munson.

"I'll need a man to help tote this stretcher," Jayworthy shouted. "And shake a leg up there. She's starting to rain."

There was a bustle of motion at the gangplank and Sharlott recognized the lank shape of Russ Owens, wearing a bulky blue army overcoat now against the increasing chill of the day, as the Missourian strode down the gangplank and walked over to where Doc Jayworthy waited alongside his patient.

She saw the clean lines of his face tighten as he stooped to pick up the front end of the litter, Jayworthy taking the rear. The movement brought a choked moan from the mulewhacker and an anguished, "Gawd, take it easy, will you?"

The throngs lining the boat railing were mute as the stretcher bearers started up the steep gangplank to the boat's deck, Jayworthy puffing hoarsely, "Keep 'er level, son."

A drizzle was coming down when the *Sacajawea* churned out into the river again. The deckhand at Sharlott's side muttered, "They should of flagged down the *Redwing*. She'll make the fort in three hours. This tub will take till after sundown."

BY THE time Doan's Landing was lost in the rain a mile astern, Sharlott decided to return to her cabin. Reaching her door, she was startled to see it open and the *Sacajawea's* skipper, Anse Ebright, stepped out, followed by Doc Jayworthy.

"Oh, there you are, Miss Allister," Ebright said. "I had to commandeer your cabin for that injured man. Only other available bunk is occupied by an old lady. Crek's quarters below decks are too hard to reach with a man on a stretcher."

Confusion swam through Sharlott. This meant she would have to remain on deck despite the inclement weather.

"Of course, Captain Ebright. He is welcome to my cabin."

Whisky vapors fouled Jayworthy's breath as the frontier doctor told her hoarsely, "You'll git your bunk back soon as we unload Buck Volmer at Munson, lady."

Ebright had hurried off. Hearing the injured man's retching groans, she said, "Don't worry about me. Is—is there no hope for saving his leg?"

Jayworthy's elephantine shoulders lifted and fell under his rain-wet buffalo. "Doubt it. Them army sawbones at Munson may cut away the rotted muscle and patch him up. I done what I could for him at Doan's. Bone surgery ain't my line."

Sharlott said conversationally, "It is a shame you didn't flag down the *Redwing*. She would have put your patient ashore at the fort a good couple of hours before this steamer will."

From inside the cabin Volmer bawled lustily, "Doc! Doc!"

A surly malevolence kindled in Jayworthy's porcine eyes as he backed into the cabin doorway to rejoin his patient.

"Had all I could do to make Buck Volmer agree to board this boat as 'twas. Seems he served a stretch in the infantry and mistrusts them army medicos."

The door slammed in her face and Sharlott heard the injured man shriek, "Whisky, Doc. Gawd, give me a shot of whisky—"

The leaden skies began to dump a veritable deluge, obscuring the slow march of the Oregon shoreline as the *Sacajawea* rocked and rolled to the influx of the John Day River's muddy waters. Lights began to shine aboard the river packet as the girl made her way to the shelter of the texas's overhang.

The slanting rain hammered the foredeck. Huddled in the murk between a bulkhead and a ventilator's cylindrical shaft, Sharlott tried to make herself inconspicuous as men started below decks or tried to crowd into the jam-packed men's salon.

The *Sacajawea* had no lounge for the use of women passengers, and Sharlott believed she was as well off as she could be, here in the shelter of the texas. Not until the injured mulewhacker Buck Volmer had been unloaded at Fort Munson, after dark tonight, would she be free to return to her cabin.

She could see into the smoke-fouled, lamplighted men's salon. Once when the door opened she caught sight of Russ Owens prowling the outer deck, looking this way and that, peering into the faces of every man he met.

He's looking for me, she thought, and rejected the warm glow that knowledge brought her. Russ had volunteered to help bring the crippled mulewhacker aboard. He must have known that Volmer had been assigned to her cabin and that she would consequently be dispossessed.

The interminable day wore on, with Sharlott huddled in a kneeling position against the bulkhead. Twice before sundown the *Sacajawea*, slowest freighter on the river, made two hour-long stops to unload freight at obscure Oregon settlements.

When darkness came Sharlott saw Russ Owens elbow his way into the crowded salon and accept a chair at a card table. He hung his cinnamon-brown sombrero on a stanchion peg and she saw his lips move as he accepted cards from the dealer. She could tell by his clumsy way with the chips that he was no expert gambler. Trying to make a stake after last night's robbery, maybe.

SOMETIME in the following hour, Sharlott was snapped out of a half-doze by a lurching shock which knocked her off balance. Her first thought was that the *Sacajawea* had collided head-on with some craft bound downriver.

Men swarmed out of the crew's companionway and their anxiety told her that the *Sacajawea* was in serious trouble. The engines' vibration ceased; anchor chains rattled through hawse-pipes, and the *Sacajawea* came to a full stop, rolling in wind-lashed waves.

The card game inside the salon continued without interruption. Vaguely, Sharlott noticed that Russ Owens's stack of chips had grown considerably. The gamblers seemed unaware of the *Sacajawea's* mid-river halt.

Sharlott hailed a passing crewman and called anxiously, "What happened? Are we sinking?"

His reply was lost in a deep-throated whistle above decks. Captain Ebright went by at a run, his face grave.

The crew member had vanished and Sharlott hailed a passing mess steward, repeating her question.

"Nothing to excite yourself about, ma'am. Hunk of driftwood has jammed the paddlewheel. Nothing we can do but drop our mudhook. It's happened before. It'll happen again on this river."

Panic stormed through Sharlott, remembering how urgent it was to get to Wallula tomorrow. Time lost now could be fatal.

"How long will we be delayed?"

The steward shrugged. "Hard to say. Skipper's sending a boat over to Perry's Bluff to see if he can have the ferryboat tow us in for repairs. There ain't any danger, lady."

Sharlott tried to force herself to relax. Surely the *Sacajawea's* damaged stern-wheel would be repaired during the night. As long as they reached Wallula before day after tomorrow, the franchise deadline, her father's stage line would be secure. It was a comfort to know that they had a twenty-four hour leeway.

The purser found Sharlott asleep an hour later and his touch brought her to her feet, fingers clutching the little derringer inside her muff.

"Been hunting you, Miss Allister." The purser grinned. "Skipper says for you to join him up in the pilot house. It's warm up there."

Sharlott said, "How do I get up there?"

"Go down this passageway to the end and climb the ladder to the top deck. I'd escort you, but we've got a sick man in the engine room and I'm the nearest thing to a doctor aboard."

As the purser moved off Sharlott called out, "There's a medical man in my cabin—"

"Jayworthy?" the purser scoffed. "He's drunk. Besides which he won't leave his own patient."

The purser moved away with his lantern. Subconsciously, Sharlott realized that the *Sacajawea* still rode at anchor. The beat of rain had diminished and patches of stars showed through rifts in the clouds massed over the Oregon hills.

She found the passageway which the purser had indicated and groped her way through total blackness, her shoulders aching now with the dragging weight of the gold-laden vest. It seemed an eternity since she had come aboard with her concealed burden.

At the dead end of the passageway she located the iron ladder which would take her topside to the shelter of Ebright's pilot-house. She had her foot on the lower rung and was starting to climb when a match flared briefly behind her and was instantly extinguished.

Then the crook of a man's arm was about her throat, stifling her scream as she was pulled violently off the ladder. Something exploded on Sharlott's temple and she felt herself plunging into a void where all sensation, all sense of panic fled from her being and left her afloat in a nameless oblivion.

THE STINGING taste of brandy was on Sharlott's tongue when she rallied around. A blinding light was in her eyes and as she drew them into focus she saw the big wheel of the *Sacajawea's* pilot-house before her.

She was slumped in a wicker chair, facing the anxious eyes of Captain Ebright. The riverboat captain held a brandy bottle in one fist. Over his other arm was slung a black garment which she recognized as her coat, the coat she had determined not to take off at any cost as long as she was aboard the *Sacajawea*.

"You'll be all right," Ebright was saying. "You had a fall—"

Her head was splitting to each throb of her heart but she was lucid enough to clutch her arms to her bosom and look down. Lamplight glared on her white shirtwaist, glinted off the watch hanging from her bosom by a gold clip.

The beaded Umatilla vest was gone.

She heard her own voice choking out, "The gold—what happened to the gold—"

Ebright reamed the neck of the brandy bottle to her lips and said anxiously, "There, now, Miss Allister, you're all right. A nasty rap on the temple, but otherwise you weren't harmed. Thank God for that."

Sharlott jerked her head away, felt some of the stinging liquor course down her neck under the tight-fitting collar of the shirtwaist.

Opening her eyes to the glare of the helm lamp again, she realized that the *Sacajawea's* engines were still silent.

"Who took off my coat?" she panted wildly.

Captain Ebright gently pushed her back into the chair.

"My steward found you at the bottom of the bridge ladder, Miss Allister. You must try and remember. You were on your way up the ladder when you slipped and fell."

She pushed hard against his restraining arms.

"No—no! Someone—a man—trailed me down that hallway and pulled me off the ladder. Was I wearing my coat when your steward found me?"

Ebright's sweat-beaded face froze into shocked lines.

"No, you were not. Mr. Howard assumed you were carrying the coat when you fell off the ladder."

The crushing truth numbed Sharlott Allister's senses. What Ebright had assumed to be an unfortunate accident to his passenger had been a boldly executed assault with robbery as its motive.

FOR THE first time, she became aware of the fact that the purser was standing alongside his chair, a man's cinnamon-brown hat in his hands.

"Cap'n," the purser said hesitantly, "I told you it was no accidental fall. This hat lying on the deck under Miss Allister—it could have been one her attacker lost in the scuffle."

Sharlott was staring at the brown sombrero as if bewitched. Groping out a hand, she seized the hat, fingering the rawhide lacing around its brim.

The pounding ache in her head increased to a sickening intensity as she turned the sombrero over and saw the initials perforated in the leather sweatband. R. M. O. *Russell Owens*. The evidence of those three damning initials was irrefutable. Even without the initials she knew she remembered having seen this California-style headgear.

She turned to stare into Ebright's face.

"Captain," she said in a controlled voice, "I was wearing a buckskin vest under my coat. It contained eight pokes of gold dust—ten thousand dollars belonging to my father. It was the dust Dad was going to use to pay for those four Concord stages you're freighting to Wallula."

Ebright's jaw sagged open.

"You were carrying that much gold dust—on your person?" the *Sacajawea's* captain whispered harshly. "You were robbed?"

Sharlott got unsteadily to her feet. Staring out the wheelhouse windows, she saw the lights of a boat of some kind putting off from the Oregon bank in the direction of the anchored *Sacajawea*.

Swinging her gaze back to Ebright, Sharlott said in a dull voice, "Whoever knocked me out got that dust, Captain. But I know who it was. And he still must be aboard."

The purser said excitedly, "You know who owns this hat, lady?"

Sharlott said, "Of course. And you could

have found out easily enough if you had checked the initials in the band with your passenger list. A man named Russell Owens wore that hat."

Ebright muttered an oath and wheeled about, taking a ring of keys from his oilskin slicker. He unlocked a cabinet alongside his compass binnacle and from it withdrew a stubby-barreled Greener shotgun.

"Maybe it's a lucky thing that driftlog disabled our wheel," he rasped grimly. "If it hadn't been for that, this Owens could have debarked at Perry's Bluff."

Ebright thrust the shotgun into the purser's hands, then turned to his gun cabinet and drew out a Remington .44.

"You wait here, Miss Allister," the skipper said harshly. "We'll comb this tub from stem to stern until we locate this Russell Owens for you."

As the two men started to leave the wheelhouse, Sharlott called them back.

"I think I can help you. He was playing cards in the men's salon, just before I started up here. He wears a blue army overcoat. He was the man who helped bring the injured mulewhacker aboard at Doan's Landing."

Ebright's eyes flashed. "I remember the bucko. Don't worry, Miss Allister. He'll have the dust on him."

Sharlott settled back in the wicker chair and closed her eyes, groping her hands to the swollen bruises on her skull. Her hair was sticky with dried blood.

Thinking of Owens, a sick disillusionment grew in her. How fantastic the vagaries of fate! Had it not been for the accidental stalling of the *Sacajawea* with a damaged paddlewheel, Russ Owens might have left the steamer by now, at Perry's Bluff.

SUDDENLY the hoot of the approaching vessel's whistle reached the girl's ears and she was aware of shouting voices on the foredeck below. Getting to her feet, she peered through the open window to see a squatty ferry boat heaving to a few yards off the *Sacajawea's* starboard bow.

Northward, the looming bluffs of the Washington shore stood out in stark relief under a high-wheeling moon. On the Oregon side she made out the winking lights of a small settlement which she knew must be Perry's Bluff.

Crewmen were busy making a tow line fast to the *Sacajawea's* capstan forward. A burly helmsman in a rain-slick coat shouldered into the wheelhouse and stepped to the helm.

"Is the damage very bad?" Sharlott asked.

The wheelman grunted. "Cracked pitman bar. A few smashed paddles. Not as bad as hanging up on a sandbar."

There was a commotion outside and Captain Ebright appeared in the doorway. Seeing the man on duty at the wheel, he said gruffly, "I'll take over, Dave."

As the helmsman crawled through the narrow doorway to the wing deck, Sharlott saw Russ Owens standing in the lampshine, one armed gripped by Howard, the purser, the other by a white-aproned ship's cook. Owens was wearing his brown sombrero now and his face was set in frozen lines as he returned Sharlott's stare.

"I'm afraid we didn't find your gold dust, Miss Allister," was Ebright's shocking news. "Owens isn't the robber. He has an unshakable alibi."

For some reason Sharlott could not immediately define, she felt a rush of gladness at this news. From the moment of identifying his California-style hat, here in the pilothouse, it had seemed incredible that the clean-cut young miner could have been guilty of slugging her.

"He was playing poker with our galley boss, Sam Kelly," Ebright went on. "Didn't leave the table once since about twenty minutes before the driftlog crippled us. And you were attacked within the last half hour."

As if from a remote distance, Sharlott heard herself saying, "I'm glad he could prove his innocence, Captain. He admits the hat was his?"

Ebright nodded. "Owens claims any one of a hundred ruffians could have lifted the hat off the hook where he'd hung it. The question is, who would try to frame Owens

by leaving his hat under your body after he knocked you out?"

Anchor chains rattled and the *Sacajawea* lurched underfoot as the bight of the ferryboat towline went taut. The lights of Perry's Bluff began wheeling around.

"My gold," Sharlott said, "has got to be aboard somewhere."

Ebright nodded. "I know that. While we are tied up for repairs at the Bluff, I'll have armed guards posted throughout the vessel to make sure nobody goes ashore, miss."

"Thank you, Captain Ebright. If I don't recover that gold it means bankruptcy for Dad's stage line."

Ebright said reassuringly, "You'll recover it, I promise you that. As soon as possible I intend to search every man aboard, from stem to stern."

Sharlott stepped to the wheelhouse doorway and put the full strike of her eyes on Russ Owens for a moment. A faint grin softened the taut fixture of the young Missourian's lips as Sharlott said to the purser, "Turn him loose, please."

The white-aproned man she assumed to be the cook who had alibied Owens said, "We searched him proper, lady. Your gold ain't under his coat. I'll vouch for that. He even left his chips on the card table when the cap'n came for him."

Ebright snapped to his two crewmen, "Kelly, you and Mr. Howard take over guarding the gangplank when we dock. Absolutely no one is to be allowed ashore as long as we are tied up. Is that understood?"

The crewmen saluted and turned away. Ebright stepped to the wheel, his eye on the towing ferryboat which was now bringing them alongside the riverfront of Perry's Bluff.

THEN SHARLOTT found herself alone on the wing deck with Russ Owens. He stepped over beside her and said gently, "This terrible thing would not have happened if I had been able to locate you, Miss Allister. When we brought that injured man to your cabin and you weren't there, I almost believed you'd fallen overboard or something."

She reached out and touched his hand where it lay on the railing.

"You were right about my carpetbag containing gold, Russ. That was what the robber at the hotel was after last night in the Dalles, I think. Forty-one pounds of gold dust."

Owens's mouth puckered in a soundless whistle.

"You ought to be spanked, young lady, for carrying a fortune around like that, without a man to guard you."

She lifted her hand away.

"I was quite capable—" Her voice trailed off, realizing how miserably she had failed her father. Now that her head was clearing, the first full realization of her loss had come to haunt her.

Russ Owens said with deadly earnestness, "I intend to locate that gold for you, Miss Allister. Someone tried to shove the blame on me, by stealing my hat. I can't help remembering that if I hadn't had a ship's man to alibi me, you would be regarding me now as a thief."

He turned away with that, and she saw his head and shoulders vanish down a companionway ladder.

The *Sacajawea* was alongside the Perry's Bluff wharf now and dock wallopers were securing her lines fore and aft. Lighted lanterns shed an eerie witch-glow over the steamer and Sharlott saw men with rifles station themselves at the gangplank, ordering the rough passengers to remain on board.

Sharlott heard a puffing sound at the companionway behind her and turned to recognize Doc Jayworthy of Doan's Landing climbing out on the wing deck.

The reek of whisky touched the girl's nostrils as the doctor lurched his way to the pilothouse door, in time to meet Captain Ebright on the way out.

"Cap'n," Jayworthy said thickly, "I understand you've slapped a quarantine on this floating washtub. I demand to know why I am not allowed to take Volmer ashore."

Ebright regarded the drunken medico sternly.

"There has been a robbery committed

aboard within the past hour, Doc. No one leaves this vessel while we are undergoing repairs."

Jayworthy fished a greasy bandanna out of his coat pocket and blew his nose loudly.

"There is a stage pullling out of Perry's Bluff in a quarter of an hour, headed for Walla Walla," the doctor explained. "I figgered with your tub tied up for God knows how long, I could get Volmer to Fort Munson on that stage."

Ebright hesitated, his taut facial muscles relaxing.

"That is a different matter," he conceded. "Come on. I will allow your patient to be taken ashore."

Sharlott, staring at Doc Jayworthy's huge shape, cleared her throat and said adamantly, "Captain, I must insist that this man be searched first."

EBRIGHT whirled around, startled by her voice. Then he nodded and turned to Jayworthy. "Shuck off that coat, Doc. Miss Allister is right. Not even you can leave this boat without being searched."

Jayworthy's eyes squinted belligerently for a moment. Then he stripped off his heavy coat to reveal a grimy bartender's apron draped over his purple silk shirt and protuberant belly.

Sharlott's heart hammered her ribs as she watched Ebright go over the doctor's corpulent shape with thorough hands, unbuttoning his shirt and frisking him from his shoulders to his boot tops.

That done, Ebright jerked the coat from Jayworthy's grasp and inspected it inside and out.

"He's all right, Miss Allister," Ebright said. "Just a formality, Doc. Let's go below."

Sharlott remained on the lofty wing deck, knowing this part of the ship was out of bounds to the uncouth passengers. Five minutes later she saw the man with the broken leg being carried on the wooden door to the top of the gangplank.

It came as no surprise to see that Russ Owens had once again volunteered to help Jayworthy take his patient ashore. Buck Volmer lay motionless under his blanket, either asleep or under the influence of morphine.

"Oh, no, don't disturb him," Sharlott breathed, as she saw the guards at the gangplank order the injured man's litter placed on the deck.

She saw Captain Ebright shoulder through the crowd of spectators and squat down, pulling the blanket off Volmer. White bandage gleamed in the lantern light, where the mulewhacker's left overall leg had been scissored off at the hip.

Ebright ran his hands briefly over Volmer's shirt, nodded, and restored the blanket in place. Then he turned to Russ Owens and said something.

Ebright was taking no chances. In full view of everyone, the young Missourian shucked off his army overcoat while the steamer's skipper gave his person a thorough frisking, lest he had had time, in the interim, to have donned Sharlott's gold-laden buckskin vest.

Jayworthy and Owens picked up Volmer's litter again and, getting Ebright's signal, headed down the gangplank onto the dock. Ebright followed them, turning toward the rear of the *Sacajawea* to superintend the repairs to the paddlewheel.

SHARLOTT paced the narrow wing deck in an agony of suspense. Ebright could not conduct his man-by-man search of the passengers until the mechanical damage had been repaired. That might take all night. What if the thief threw her gold-laden vest overboard when word got out that all passengers were to be searched?

She watched Russ Owens and the buffalo-coated doctor vanish down an alley between two warehouses on their way to the Perry's Bluff stage depot. It gave her a strange sense of relief to know that Buck Volmer, the complete stranger who had occupied her cabin this side of Doan's Landing, would soon be on his way to Fort Munson's hospital by stage.

Time dragged. Fifteen minutes, twenty, thirty. Sharlott found her eyes fixed on the alley mouth where she had last seen Russ Owens toting Volmer's litter.

Why hadn't Russ come back to the boat?

She had heard Jayworthy say that the Walla Walla stage would be leaving this settlement in fifteen minutes. By now, it must be well on its way to Fort Munson, twenty miles up the river.

The thought occurred to her that Owens might have also boarded that stage. He had won a stake in his poker game. But was saving time that important to the miner?

Besides, his parting words to her had been a vow to help search the *Sacajawea* until her missing gold dust was brought to light. And Russ Owens struck her as a man who kept his promises.

Something's happened to him—I know it, she told herself.

A strange foreboding, a sense of disaster abroad on the night, put a tremor through Sharlott's body. Not quite knowing why, she found herself scrambling down the companionway ladder where she had been slugged into unconsciousness.

Emerging from the passageway, she paused, knowing that her cabin was now available for her use. Instead of going there, she worked her way through the sleepy passengers until she came to the gangplank.

Howard, the purser, and Kelly in his cook's apron were squatting on the upper edge of the gangplank, shotguns cradled across their knees.

"Mr. Owens has not come back yet, has he?" she asked the purser.

Howard climbed to his feet, staring at her.

"No, by thunder, he ain't. That's downright peculiar."

Kelly drawled sleepily, "The kid done what I'd do if I could get ashore. Went to a saloon for a pick-me-up. He knows we'll be tied up here a considerable spell."

Sharlott stared off inland, where Perry's Bluff's riverfront buildings blocked off the lights of the settlement's main street.

"I'm going ashore," she said suddenly. "I must."

Howard shook his head. "You heard the cap'n's orders, ma'am. Nobody leaves. I let you go, these buckos would start clamoring to have a chance to prowl the honky-tonks in town while we're tied up."

Sharlott said desperately, "But Captain Ebright's order was for my benefit. You know I didn't steal my own gold."

Howard resumed his seat at her feet.

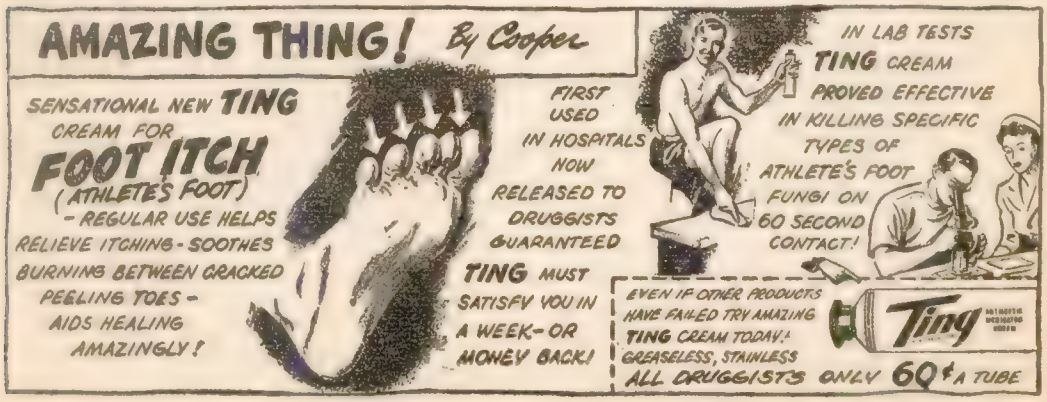
"Lady," the purser yawned, "aboard this scow, Ebright's word is law. We got orders to allow nobody to set foot off the deck. Why don't you go back to the cabin and ketch some sleep?"

Sharlott turned away, a wildness storming through her. Russ Owens was not the carousing type of man. There must be some reason why he had been detained this long.

AT THE stern of the *Sacajawea*, cursing men labored by lantern light to extricate the massive chunk of drift from the steamer's paddlewheel. Another crew was on board, replacing a fractured pitman bar.

Sharlott turned back to face the two gangplank guards. Their chins drooped on

[*Turn page*]


AMAZING THING! By Cooper
SENSATIONAL NEW TING CREAM FOR FOOT ITCH (ATHLETE'S FOOT) - REGULAR USE HELPS RELIEVE ITCHING - SOOTHES BURNING BETWEEN CRACKED PEELING TOES - AIDS HEALING AMAZINGLY!
FIRST USED IN HOSPITALS NOW RELEASED TO DRUGGISTS GUARANTEED
TING MUST SATISFY YOU IN A WEEK - OR MONEY BACK!
IN LAB TESTS TING CREAM PROVED EFFECTIVE IN KILLING SPECIFIC TYPES OF ATHLETE'S FOOT FUNGI ON 60 SECOND CONTACT!
EVEN IF OTHER PRODUCTS HAVE FAILED TRY AMAZING TING CREAM TODAY! GREASELESS, STAINLESS
Ting
ALL DRUGGISTS ONLY 60¢ A TUBE

their chests. There was a foot of space between Kelly and the purser.

Without warning, she leaped between them and fled down the cleated gangplank, stumbling to fall on hands and knees on the splintered wharf.

She heard Howard's bull-like roar ordering her to halt as she scrambled to her feet. The purser had his gun half raised as he started down the gangplank after her.

Sprinting like a wild thing beset by a wolf pack, Sharlott raced into the blot of darkness where two warehouses were separated by a narrow alley. She heard the purser's pounding boots come to a halt, heard his following oaths.

She lost her hat as she plunged wildly down the alley, heading for the dim blur of lights on the street ahead. Reaching the end of the warehouses, she looked right and left up a narrow thoroughfare flanked by unpainted, false-fronted saloons and store buildings.

Little details of the scene impinged themselves on the girl's mind. The hands of a clock over the Perry's Bluff post office directly opposite the alley entrance showed the time to be five minutes after midnight.

A nickelodeon's discordant music came from a deadfall next to the post office. A row of cowponies stood hip shot and three-footed at a rack in front of the saloon.

Then, half a block down the street to the westward, she saw the night stage tenders hitching a relief team to a weatherbeaten Concord. The only persons aboard in the night were gathered around the stage office, waiting for the coach to pull out. It was headed east.

Crossing the mud-puddled street, Sharlott gained the shelter of a wooden-awninged mercantile store and headed toward the stage office. She remembered vaguely some thing about the stage schedules on the Oregon side of the river and recalled that at this season of the year, only one stage made the run between The Dalles and Walla Walla daily.

If this was the Walla Walla stage, then it was the one Doc Jayworthy had mentioned to the *Sacajewea's* captain. It was either an hour later, or else the Doan's Landing man had been mistaken about its schedule.

Passing the saloon and entering a pool of darkness in front of a livery, Sharlott approached the stage office just as a gray-whiskered jehu was climbing into the box with a mail sack tucked under his arm.

Then she saw two men leave the stage office and head for the waiting Concord. One of them she recognized as the bulky shape of Doc Jayworthy.

The stage jounced on its bullhide thoroughbraces as the two men entered and closed the door behind them. A shotgun guard mounted the near front wheel and the driver kicked off his brake and whipped the six-horse team into motion.

Relief flowed through Sharlott Allister in warm waves. This was why Russ had not returned to The *Sacajawea*. He had tarried here to load the injured man aboard this coach. He would be in the group of men lounging under the awning of the stage stand.

Sharlott put her back to the wall of the livery as the Concord drew abreast, its high yellow wheels spattering her with mud.

Lamplight from the stage stand gleamed on the mud-mottled sides of the Concord, and Sharlott caught a glimpse of a man's hairy face in the rear window as he reached to pull down the canvas curtain.

A low cry escaped Sharlott Allister's lips. That man was the passenger who had boarded the coach immediately ahead of the Doan's Landing doctor. His face was indelibly stamped on her memory. It was the face of Buck Volmer, the mulewhacker who was supposed to be heading for the Fort Munson hospital with a gangrenous leg.

SHARLOTT ran out into the mud of the street, her cry following the Walla Walla stage as it lumbered off into the night and was lost to sight around a bend of the street.

"Volmer didn't have a broken leg! He came aboard the *Sacajawea* on a pretext. It was Volmer who stole my gold!"

Desperation was in the girl as she turned to face the stage depot. The hostlers had

gone back inside. She could see everyone in that room, gathering around a cherry-red stove. Russ Owens was not among them.

A sense of desperation touched the girl. But indecision was not part of her make-up. She decided what her next move must be.

She would return to the *Sacajawea* and enlist the aid of the only person she knew she could trust to help her—Captain Ebright. He would know if there was a telegraph line between this settlement and Fort Munson. Word could be flashed ahead for the military police to meet the stage and detain Jayworthy and Volmer.

She fled into the alley which led to the waterfront. Ten feet from its entrance, she stumbled over an obstacle underfoot and plunged headlong on her hands and knees.

A groaning sound paralyzed her. She became aware that she had not fallen into the soggy gumbo of the alley floor, but on a wooden surface. Her groping hands explored the rough wood, encountered a metal hinge on the outside edge of a board.

A door. The plank door which had served as a makeshift litter for the impostor who had been Doc Jayworthy's patient.

Another groan behind her reached Sharlott's ear as she opened her reticule with fumbling hands and located the little waterproof matchbox she always carried with her. She scratched one of the lucifers alight and turned around to see what had caused her to stumble.

A man lay sprawled in the mud alongside the warehouse wall, close enough to the building so she had missed the obstacle on her flight up the alley from the dock a few minutes ago.

The man wore a muddy blue army overcoat. Blood was guttering from a welt in his scalp. Just as the match pinched out between her fingers, she saw the man's eyes open dazedly. From her first glimpse, she had known this man was Russ Owens.

THE GELID drip of water off the warehouse eaves overhead had washed the blood and mud off Owen's head and was responsible for reviving him this soon after the blow that had knocked him out.

Sharlott Allister got her arms about the dazed man and helped him to a half-prone position, cradling his bleeding head against her.

"They could have killed you," she choked out, twining her fingers through his wet-sopped hair, sensing his helplessness, his dependence on her as his fogged brain groped back to reality.

She heard him swallow hard, and then with an effort that drew a gasp from him, Russ Owens pulled himself away from her arms and got unsteadily to his feet. Lurching forward, he leaned both arms against the wall of the warehouse, letting the eaves drip lave his bloodied skull and clear his head.

"Your gold—was on the under side—of that litter," he said hoarsely. "The blanket kept the guards from spotting it as we were leaving the boat. But it was—there. I knew it by the extra weight. That patient of the doctor's—weighed more leaving the boat than he did—coming aboard at Doan's."

Sharlott came closer to him, feeling the urgency of time running out on her if Volmer's stage was to be intercepted at Fort Munson, yet knowing this injured man needed her.

"I know it, Russ," she said gently. "I saw the crippled man getting aboard the Walla Walla stage. Only he wasn't crippled."

The remote glare of lanterns aboard the *Sacajawea* penetrated down this alley and Sharlott's eyes, accustomed to the dim light now, saw the young Missourian's face react to her words.

"I was stupid," he panted. "By the time we had gotten this far with the litter—I knew why it was heavier. I thought it was that doctor who was the guilty one. Didn't occur to me—the patient was in on the deal."

She waited for him to go on, heartened by the fact that his voice was steadier. She held a balled-up handkerchief against the gash on his scalp, stemming the slow seep of blood.

"I called the doctor, branded him for a thief," Owens went on in a stronger voice. "He dropped his end of the litter. I jumped

him, expected him to draw a gun or a knife. Knew I could handle him. Then Volmer hauled out a gun—and clipped me from behind while Doc and I were mixing it up."

He pushed away from the wall now and clutched her shoulders for a moment until his equalibrium returned.

"They aimed to kill me, let it be thought some alley rat murdered me on my way back to the boat," Owens said. "I wasn't knocked out—hat absorbed the blow. But Volmer rammed my head into a mud-puddle, thought he'd strangled me."

Nausea touched Sharlott Allister, visualizing his ordeal in the mud.

"I saw them up-end the litter. Your vest was tied to the under side. They headed on up the alley. Then I passed out. They thought I'd drowned in that puddle or they'd never have left me."

Owens groped around and recovered his hat.

Sharlott said, "Wait here and I'll go to the boat for help. Don't try to walk."

The young miner reached out a hand to seize her arm.

"No time for that. You say that pair took the stage?"

"Yes. Ten minutes ago. I saw them get aboard. I was running for help when I stumbled over your body."

A tiny rivulet of blood wormed down under Owen's hatband and left its track across his cheek. Sharlott was standing where the dim light from the dock let him see her and she was suddenly aware of her disheveled appearance, the untidiness of her mud-spattered coat.

"We can't waste time," Owens said. "I've got to run down that stage."

"I thought we could telegraph ahead to the fort—"

He shook his head, the movement making him grimace.

"No. Ten to one there isn't a wire strung up to Munson anyway. Even if there was, we'd have to roust out an operator this time of night. On horseback I could overtake that stage."

He was heading up the alley toward the street now. Coming abreast of him, Sharlott said, "Do you have a gun?"

He did not speak again until they had reached the end of the alley. The lights had gone out in the stage office, leaving only the saloon's brilliance to augment the moonlight.

"I'll get a gun," he said doggedly. "You go back to the *Sacajawea*. I'll go overland to Wallula. And I'll have your gold when I show up, Sharlott—"

He turned toward her now, his face suddenly losing his tension as he grinned.

For a moment they stood there, facing each other, and then his arms reached out and she felt him sweep her hard against his body.

An overpowering surge of desire that was totally strange to her experience flamed through Sharlott as she lifted her mouth to his, her hands going up behind his head to respond to the pressure of his own embrace, returning his kiss with a blind fervor that equalled his own quick passion.

He released her as suddenly as he had pulled her to him, and his voice had a strained breathiness as he said, "I wanted to do that the first time I laid eyes on you in The Dalles. But don't think about it tonight. This is not my usual way with strangers, even strangers as beautiful as you."

BEFORE she could speak he had heeled around and was going across the street of Perry's Bluff at an awkward run. She saw that he was heading for the line of cowponies hitched at the saloon rack and instantly she defined his purpose.

Owens ducked under the tie bar and strode the length of it, sizing up each tethered horse in turn. Then he selected a blue roan gelding that belonged to some cowpuncher who was bucking the tiger inside the deadfall, untied the reins and backed it away from the rack.

He was in saddle when Sharlott slogged across the muddy thoroughfare. The saloon lights put Owens in sharp silhouette as he turned the roan around to face the east, and as the girl halted at his nigh stirrup she saw Owens snake a Spencer .56 repeater out of a scabbard under the saddle fender.

"Seven shots in this blunderbuss," Owens

said after a quick check. "Five more than I'll need."

"Russ," Sharlott called sharply. "Russ, I don't—"

He was gone, kicking the roan into a full gallop from a standing start, leaving the girl alone in the muddy street.

She looked around wildly, wondering if the muffled drumroll of hoofbeats receding up the street would bring the owner of the stolen pony out of the saloon.

Then, while indecision roiled through her, she saw a man with a lantern slung over his arm emerge from the door of a mercantile store alongside the saloon and pause to padlock it.

Sharlott looked down at her full-skirted coat and dress, and in that instant her mind was made up. At this hour of the night, only providence could have provided her with this opportunity.

Running up the plank walk, she overtook the oldster with the lantern, brought him to a halt by gripping his arm.

"Please," she gasped to the startled storekeeper, "do you—do you sell men's clothing?"

The oldster lifted his lantern, sizing up this disheaveled girl as if he thought she were demented.

"Never knowed business to be so rushing, this time of night," he grunted. "Got pulled away from a poker game at the New Republic to sell a man a pair of pants before the stage pulled out. And now comes more business. Shore, I sell duds."

Sharlott turned the man around and pushed him toward the deserted store.

"I want a pair of dungarees," she said, "and a hat of some kind. And boots. I can't ride a horse in these awful clothes."

Inside the store, watching the bemused trader haul out his stock, Sharlott Allister had the uncanny sensation that this was a nightmare she would be awaking from to find herself in her own warm bed at home in Wallula.

"Is there anywhere in the store I can change into these?" she asked when the storekeeper had laid out a pair of waist overalls, knee-length boots and a flat-crowned hat.

The storekeeper gestured toward the rear of the building, handing her the lantern.

"In the storeroom yonder. That'll cost you twelve-sixty, ma'am."

She jerked open her reticule and fished out a twenty-dollar gold piece, the only coin she possessed.

"Here," she said, scooping up the clothes. "And I don't want the change. You don't know how lucky I am to find you at your store this time of night."

She fled to the rear of the building and, once inside a back shed stacked with boxes and bales of merchandise, divested herself of her feminine attire and wriggled into her new purchases.

The customer who had brought this storekeeper to unlock his place of business, she knew, had been Buck Volmer, replacing the cut-away trousers which had exposed the bandaged splints on his supposedly broken leg.

Retaining only her reticule, into which she stowed her father's .47 derringer, Sharlott left her discarded clothing on the storeroom floor and, snatching up the lantern, raced back to where the thoroughly bewildered storekeeper waited at his counter, her change in hand.

"Don't know what's back of this puzzling percedure," the old man said, "but I only want what's coming to me, not a red penny more."

She thrust the lantern into his hands and backed away.

"One last favor, sir," she said breathlessly. "If you could go into the saloon next door and let the proprietor know that two of his customers are going to find their horses missing. Tell them they'll be reimbursed for the use of the horses—that I—we will leave them safe and sound in the stables at Fort Munson."

The storekeeper called out after her, but Sharlott was already gone through the doorway.

TO HER overpowering relief, no one was lurking about the front of the saloon. She chose the horse nearest the end of the rack, a close-coupled bay with a shad belly. Pausing to tighten the

girth, she unhitched and stepped into stirrups.

The bay, thus chosen at random, might well prove to be a bucker, but Sharlott Allister had grown up in saddle and at the mount's first response to the reins she knew she could handle him.

Taking the bit in its teeth, the cowpony reared, snorted in triumph at the prospect of leaving the rack, and then lined off down Perry Bluff's street at a dead run. Sharlott had a blurred glimpse of the storekeeper yelling at her from the mercantile doorway. Then she had her hands full sticking to the saddle.

Perry Bluff's outskirts flashed past and the horse was pounding off along the riverbank road, the moonlight picking up the fresh ruts of the Walla Walla stage's recent passage.

For three miles she let the bay work off its steam, and then, gripping the horn for insurance, she pulled it down to a ground-gaining lope, knowing the danger of gaunting her mount with fifteen miles yet to ride.

Ahead of her stretched the semi-desert reaches of the Oregon plateau. The moon was unbelievably bright; the stars put their foamy glitter in the silent Columbia.

At the top of a long rise she twisted in stirrups, half expecting pursuit from the settlement. She saw the blaze of red and green running lights on the *Sacajawea,* sheering away from the dock to resume her up-river passage. Then the hogback was behind her and she concentrated on the distance ahead.

Somewhere up this road, maybe two miles ahead, Russ Owens would be pounding along in pursuit of the Walla Walla stage. If Oregon stages were run like her father's outfit, she doubted if it would make a team change this side of Fort Munson.

The coach bearing Doc Jayworthy and Buck Volmer had a good five-mile head start on Owens, she knew, but a lone rider on horseback could make better time than a team.

Her mind reverted to the urgency of Russ's kiss and the memory of it was like wine charging her blood. For her sake, Russ was running a deadly risk tonight.

Jayworthy and Volmer had left Perry's Bluff under the impression that the man who had discovered their perfidy was lying dead in an alley mud puddle. If they recognized the rider who would overhaul their stage in this vivid moonlight, they would be sure to open fire from the coach window. The stage crew might even start shooting, under the belief that they were being stopped by a road agent.

The deep-chested bay flung back the miles with a seemingly tireless reserve of stamina. By now, its owner was probably cursing the loss of such a fine animal. In all probability, riders were already hammering along her back trail.

At the crest of each rolling hill, Sharlott scanned the forward landscape for some trace of the halted stage, her ears steeled for the thunder of shots breaking in the night.

On the river behind her, the *Sacajawea* was making better time than she was, on the straightaway of the Columbia. She guessed that the purser had not dared report her disembarkation to Captain Ebright, or he would have held up the boat. . . .

Finally she saw the twinkle of fixed lights on the skyline to eastward and knew she was within sight of Fort Munson and the little town which had grown up between the army post and the river.

The Oregon road stretched off and away in the distance, gleaming like gray ash under the westering moon. At no point along that ribbon of road could she detect moving lights which would mark the stage.

She had been on this wild ride better than two hours and the bay was beginning to tire, its belly frothing, tatters of foam blowing from its lips.

By now, the stage bearing two outlaws and her stolen gold dust had had time to reach its terminal at Munson. Unless Russ Owens had been able to intercept it short of the relay station. . . .

IN THE east, the Blue Mountains were beginning to show black against a pinkening sky when Sharlott Allister reined in her jaded horse in front of the Munson stage depot.

She had followed the wheel tracks into the little river town. Approaching dawn picked out the details of the fort, built on a rise of ground overlooking the river. The town itself was asleep, save for the hostlers on duty at the stage station. She saw no trace of the Walla Walla-bound Concord. It had come and gone.

Off beyond the town, the road curved to the northeast, following the bend of the Columbia toward the border of Washington Territory on its way to Walla Walla. The question that faced her now was a dire one —had the two renegades from Doan's Landing left the stage here at Fort Munson, or was Walla Walla their destination?

She stepped down from saddle and made her way toward the lighted stage office. As she neared the building her heart leaped at the sight of a lather-drenched blue roan standing head down at the express company's hitchbar.

The horse was the one which Russ Owens had stolen from the saloon rack at Perry's Bluff better than two hours ago. The Spencer rifle was missing from its boot.

There was no one on duty inside the office. A wall clock showed the time to be three-twenty. A notation on a blackboard under the clock indicated that the Walla Walla stage had arrived and departed on schedule, fifteen minutes ago.

Leaving the office, Sharlott ran toward the barn where lantern light showed through the cracks. She trundled open a door to find a night hostler busy rubbing down the horses which had brought the stage up from Perry's Bluff tonight.

"Did any passengers get off the Walla Walla stage here tonight?" Sharlott asked the round-eyed groom.

The man's head bobbed affirmatively.

"Couple. You're the second person asked me that question."

Sharlott was sure the hostler must hear the thumping of her heart.

"Was the other one who asked a young man in a reddish-brown hat and a soldier's overcoat?"

"That's the party. He was puffing about like you."

Sharlott Allister felt an uncontrollable desire to burst out laughing. She felt as though even the stage horses were eying her with ludicrous interest from their row of stalls—even the livestock was amazed by this spectacle of a woman in a white shirtwaist and a man's overalls who had burst into the stable tonight.

"Do you know where the young man went?"

The hostler went back to work with currycomb and brush.

"We-el," he drawled, "all I know is what he asked me. Wanted to know if a couple men got off the stage tonight. I said they did, like I told you. Feller wanted to know where they went. Told him the Umatilla Hotel."

"The Umatilla Hotel?"

"Yes'm. Only hotel in town. Block south, past the Cross Sabers Dancehall. Them stage passengers inquired how to reach the hotel when they got off."

Sharlott gasped out her thanks and left the stable at a run. She located a barnlike building with a signboard shaped like a U.S. Cavalry insignia, two crossed sabers with a board reading *Dancehall* beneath.

Beyond that, at the corner of a street which wound up the hill to the army post, was a ramshackle two-story building with a signboard, *Hotel Umatilla.*

SHARLOTT'S heart was pounding as she pushed through the stained-glass doorway into the lobby. A heating stove glowed red in one corner of the dingy room. Over behind the reception desk, a wall lamp burned feebly. The desk was untended.

Making her way to the desk, Sharlott reversed the dog-eared register and scanned the signatures there. The last two names told her that her quest was nearing an end. She read:

J. J. Jayworthy, M. D. Doan's Lndg. Ore.
Silas Volmer, Prineville

A notation in another hand indicated that the two renegades had been assigned to Room FF. They had registered at 3:15 A.M.

Sharlott glanced around, knowing that within the past few minutes Russ Owens must have been doing exactly the same thing she was.

A row of muddy boot tracks led across the uncarpeted floor to a flight of stairs.

Pausing to lift the derringer from her reticule, Sharlott headed for the stairs.

At the upper landing, she looked down a murky hallway to where a door stood partly open, yellow lamplight spilling its pattern on the rough board walls.

She made her way toward that doorway, her ears catching a jumble of men's voices. One of them rose sharply, and she recognized the Missouri drawl of Russ Owens.

"I said keep 'em up, Doc. Just stand hitched."

Thrusting the little gun back into her reticule, Sharlott ran down the hall to come to a halt before the open door from which the voices issued.

Her eyes took in a stunned tableau there.

Doc Jayworthy and his erstwhile patient, Buck Volmer, stood with their backs to the wall. Hipped against a deal table in the middle of the room stood Russ Owens, his rifle clutched at his midriff, the barrel trained on the two fugitives.

Russ brought the Spencer around to cover Sharlott Allister, then returned it to hold his prisoners at bay as he recognized the girl in the doorway.

"Howdy, Sharlott," the young Missourian grinned. "Have a look over on the bed yonder and breathe easy again."

Sharlott took a faltering step into the room. Jayworthy and Volmer fixed their reptilian eyes on her as she stared down at the quilt-covered brass bed. Lying in a jumbled heap there was her father's beaded buckskin vest, lumpy with the gold-dust sacks stored in its inside compartments.

"You ought to be spanked," Owens went on in a strained voice, "for following me tonight. Afraid I couldn't track down these scalawags for you?"

Sharlott pulled in a deep breath. Her knees felt rubbery under her weight as she stepped over to the bed and lifted the Indian vest. Its excessive weight told her that her father's treasure was intact.

"I was just discussing what to do with these hoodlums," Owens went on. "They didn't take kindly to me busting in on 'em just now. I think they still figger I'm a ghost."

Sharlott let her glance shuttle between the Doan's Landing pair for a moment, unflinching in the sight of their depraved defiance.

"This is a county seat," she said. "I think we should be able to find a sheriff hereabouts who would have a nice warm jail for them, Russ."

"Either that," Owens said, "or the guardhouse up at the fort. It's a cinch we don't want to spend the rest of the night chatting with these renegades."

Sharlott put her gaze on Doc Jayworthy.

"I want to know," she said in a steady voice. "if Rex Spaulding paid you to come aboard the *Sacajawea* yesterday. It's the only possible way you could have known about that gold."

Then, from the hallway door behind Sharlott a voice spoke distinctly. "Drop the rifle, Mr. Owens. Don't make me shoot you in the back."

The voice was Rex Spaulding's.

DESPAIR made Sharlott's face marble-white as she turned to see Rex Spaulding standing in the doorway. The lampshine glinted off his gold-capped teeth, off the twin muzzles of the dragoon pistols he held leveled on her and Russ Owens.

Buck Volmer mouthed a triumphant oath as he leaped forward to jerk the Spencer from Owen's grasp. The coup was complete.

"Spaulding," Doc Jayworthy chuckled, fishing a liquor flask from his buffalo coat, "I'm glad to see you. Most opportune."

Spaulding holstered his revolvers. His eyes held a cold anger as he faced his confederates.

"The *Redwing* set me off here at the fort as I told you it would. All you had to do was report to me at my room here. Why didn't you? How could you get into a jackpot like this?"

Jayworthy said sheepishly, "We plumb

forgot what name you were going to register under in the hotel book, Rex."

The Doan's Landing man walked over to Sharlott and relieved her of the gold laden vest she was still holding.

"This remarkable garment," the doctor apologized thickly, "happens to be the wages Mr. Spaulding promised Buck and myself for our night's work. We underwent considerable risk in gaining possession of it. I trust you understand."

Russ said bitterly, "I bungled this for you, Sharlott. I didn't know Spaulding here was mixed up in your difficulties."

Spaulding laughed softly. "Allow me to explain, Mr. Owens. It was absolutely imperative that I intercept the lady's gold. Last winter, Buck Volmer had some success in attempting to discourage Jubal Allister from engaging in the stage-line business. Last night in The Dalles, Volmer tried to save us this inconvenience by filching Miss Allister's bag from the River House safe.

"When he discovered that Miss Allister had tricked us with a bag filled with junk, we had to make other plans. Obviously Sharlott had the gold in her possession. Buck could not secure passage on the *Sacajawea* at any price. Therefore, I had to dispatch him up the river by horseback to Doan's Landing—to enlist the cooperation of my clever, but sometimes bungling friend Dr. Jayworthy."

Sharlott said in a dull voice, "But why did Volmer try to implicate Mr. Owens in that robbery aboard the *Sacajawea?*"

Spaulding looked puzzled. "How's that? I had warned Volmer he might find Mr. Owens acting as your bodyguard. As for implicating him in an unpleasantness, I fail to understand."

Doc Jayworthy flipped his empty bottle onto the bed and chuckled obscenely. "Little touch of my own invention, Rex. I saw an opportunity to borrow Mr. Owens's hat. Volmer left it with the young lady after he slugged her and discovered the ingenious method she had used to smuggle the gold aboard the *Sacajawea*. You see, the boat ran into difficulty on the river. Buck and I had to take the stage from Perry's Bluff. I thought it would help to leave a red herring behind to confuse the issue."

Spaulding crossed the room to squint through the window. Then he turned back in their direction.

"A river craft is approaching the fort dock now," he said. "I believe she is the *Sacajawea.* I will return to Wallula aboard her, of course. The unfortunate fact remains that Miss Allister and the young man constitute a serious menace to our security. Disposing of them is your responsibility, Doctor."

Buck Volmer, holding his rifle on Russ Owens, laughed sharply. "There's a swamp down at the crick mouth, Rex. Bodies weighed with a few rocks sink fast in that quicksand. We'll handle 'em without any trouble."

Spaulding gathered his cape about him and walked slowly to the hall door. Turning, he removed his beaver hat and bowed gravely to Sharlott Allister.

"It pains me deeply to subject you to violence, Miss Sharlott," Spaulding said, "but I have no other recourse. The original plan involved my two partners meeting here with the confirmation that you would not arrive in Wallula today with the gold to buy those stagecoaches. The gold itself was to be payment for services rendered. But the best laid plans of mice and men aft gang aglae, to quote the poet. Now, you and Owens know enough to hang me. Whatever Buck decides to do is, for me, an elemental matter of self-defense, self-preservation. I am truly sorry. You don't know how sorry I am."

Spaulding stepped out into the hallway, then turned for a final word to his accomplices.

"It will be daylight shortly. I suggest you hurry, Doctor."

The strike of boots receded down the echoing corridor as Spaulding made his way downstairs.

Through the window, Sharlott saw the running lights of a large riverboat crawling up the Columbia, nosing in for a landing. As Spaulding had said, that was undoubtedly the *Sacajawea,* arriving belatedly from Perry's Bluff.

JAYWORTHY turned to focus his red-rimmed eyes on Buck Volmer. Alongside the table in mid-room, Russ Owens stood in a half crouch, his eyes fixed on the Spencer rifle which Volmer held leveled at his chest.

Sharlott, still rooted to her tracks alongside the bed, knew by the strained posture of Owens's body that he was appraising his chances of wresting that gun from the grinning renegade. The consequences of such an act would be suicidal. Her hand stole unnoticed into her velvet reticule.

"It's a right far jag to the crick bottom, Buck," Doc Jayworthy said. "My vote is to slug this pair and gag 'em. Hold 'em under cover here through the day. It's getting too light outside to run the risk."

Buck Volmer's eyes held a wicked glitter as he reversed the Spencer in his hands and stepped around to face Russ Owens. His intent was plain. His next move would be to smash the young miner's head with the Spencer butt.

Russ Owens read that intent and was gathering himself to spring under the arc of Volmer's bludgeon when the shot exploded like a cannon in the room.

Before Owens's unbelieving eyes, Volmer let the seven-shot rifle clatter to the floor as he reached to lock his left hand around the bullet-shattered wreckage of his right wrist.

Doc Jayworthy pulled in a heavy breath and dropped the buckskin vest. His arms came jerkily upward as he stared at the smoking derringer in Sharlott Allister's steady hand.

"Buck," the doctor said in a cold-sober voice, "they hold the aces now. Don't crowd the boy."

Russ Owens scooped up the rifle and backed off a pace as he saw Volmer sink to his knees, sick with bullet shock. From her position beside the bed, Sharlott spoke in a low voice. "Take care of the other one first, Russ. This toy only holds one shell."

Owens stepped over to the marble-topped washstand where he had placed the big six-gun he had removed from Volmer's shoulder holster.

Passing the gun to the girl, he said in an unhurried voice, "This gun holds six shells, Sharlie. I'll have to depend on you to ride herd on the good doctor and his partner until we can turn them over to the law. I'm going after Spaulding."

Jayworthy, his pudgy arms still elevated, stalked over to take his place beside Volmer. Sharlott Allister had already demonstrated her markmanship. The two renegades had a complete respect for her ability to use Volmer's Colt.

"Spaulding might have heard my derringer go off, Russ." Sharlott flung her warning at the young Missourian as he headed for the door. "Don't take any chances."

Owen paused in the doorway, his eyes showing a bubbling good humor.

"I'll be back in a jiffy," he told her. "And I'm warning you now, so you can be thinking it over. I've suddenly lost my dream to strike it rich in Idaho. And I'll be a hard fellow to shake off. I love you, Sharlott. You'll probably need a lot more time to get used to the idea. I aim to see you get it."

REX SPAULDING strolled unhurriedly down Fort Munson's empty street leading to the dock. Gray dawn was spreading over Oregon, touching the white superstructure and polished brasswork of the *Sacajawea* as the freighter tied up at her mooring.

The sound of a shot, just as he was leaving the hotel, had given Spaulding a rough moment. Buck Volmer, a professional gunman he had hired at The Dalles, was a notorious hothead. Now, by shooting down one of his prisoners in cold blood, he had made it necessary for both him and Doc Jayworthy to go on the dodge.

The fools had even signed their real names to the hotel register. Ten thousand in gold was a poor reward for what lay ahead for that pair. So far as Spaulding was concerned, the renegades had outlived their usefulness. After tomorrow, Spaulding would enjoy a monopoly of southeastern Washington stagecoaching.

Doc and Buck were no concern of his.

The gold he had permitted the two ruffians to share between them insured his own safety. He had paid well to keep this unpleasantry apart from his personal life. Who could say that he had boarded the speedy *Redwing* to pass the *Sacajawea* yesterday and be waiting here at Fort Munson for his two confederates to show up? His tracks were covered.

He paused in the shelter of a wheelwright's shop to light an expensive Cuban cigar. Down-street, a group of blue-coated troopers were debarking from the *Sacajawea,* returning from leave in The Dalles. There would be plenty of room on the packet between here and Wallula.

The first days of sunup touched the varnished shapes of the four Concord stagecoaches lashed to the steamer's foredeck. Waiting for those vehicles at the Wallula wharf would be the local agent of the Willamette Freight people.

Waiting, too, would be old Jubal Allister, expecting to greet his daughter who should be carrying the money necessary to seal his option on those Concords. Without the gold to pay for them, Allister would be helpless. He would also be bankrupt.

Spaulding felt a comfortable sensation go through his being as he contemplated the immediate future. He didn't need those Concords, but Wallula & Idaho had to have them to survive, to retain their government mail franchise without which no stage line could operate at a profit, once the Orofino gold rush petered out. And that day was not far off.

Someone was running down the empty street behind Spaulding. Some fool afraid he would miss the boat. The *Sacajawea* had a few tons of freight consigned to the army sutler's store to unload before getting under way. There was no need to hurry.

The runner was overhauling him now. Something in Rex Spaulding's criminal nature made it uncomfortable for him to have anyone at his back. That instinct made him halt now, waiting for the runner to pass him.

The runner stopped. And through the dawn hush came a panting voice, calling his name. "Turn around, Spaulding. Turn around slow. I've got you covered."

Rex Spaulding's cigar, bitten through, dropped to the planks underfoot with a little shower of sparks. His shoulders stirred under the talma cape, clearing his dragoon stocks.

He turned, slowly.

Russ Owens had the Spencer hip-high, his thumb holding the hammer back.

"I've never killed a man," the Missourian said tautly. "I don't want to kill you. But you're going to face Miss Allister and I'm going to find out what it's all about."

The gold-toothed smile lighted up Spaulding's face.

"Of course, my yokel friend. Anything to oblige."

Spaulding took a step forward, his arms crooking as if he were intending to lift them before the threat of that leveled rifle.

Then the arms went down, palms slapping gun-butts, and ruddy sunlight winked on exposed gunmetal as Spaulding made his practised draw.

Owens lifted his thumb. The hammer dropped on firing pin.

The Spencer's explosion vollied up and down the street, halted the oncoming soldiers off the *Sacajawea.*

They were Owens's witnesses. They saw the dragoons buck and flame in the cape-shrouded man's fists as he fell flat on the planks, his boot toes drumming in brief tattoo on the wood.

Owens's eyes held no malice and no regrets as he watched the last tremor run through Rex Spaulding's prostrate frame. Then he turned and headed back toward the Umatilla Hotel.

THE SUN was noon-high over the landing dock at Wallula. In his wheelchair, Jubal Allister stirred restlessly, hands fisting and opening on the long-barreled Sharps resting on the arms of the hated chair. He had been here since sunrise.

Then Tom Buffalo, his Cayuse stock tender, lifted a long arm and said, "Boat come."

Squinting off down the river, Allister made out the familiar shape of the *Saca-*

jawea bucking the muddy current, nosing around a bend.

"About time," the old man fumed. "Should of docked at four o'clock this morning. You got good eyes, you red-skinned no-good. See my Concords anywhere?"

The Indian took a long look.

"Wagons on boat. Squaw set on wagon. Squaw wave. Is good."

Allister growled, "If you're lying to me, I'll peel off your topknot and give it to some Nez Percé buck to hang on his lodgepole."

The *Sacajawea* nosed up to the wharf and Jube Allister saw with his own eyes the four brand-new Concords parked hub to hub on her foredeck. His eye ranged over to the warehouse where Willamette Freight's agent was waiting to take delivery on the stages.

Then he saw his daughter seated atop one of the Concords. He saw the flash of the sun on her. He also saw that she was no longer dressed in her society duds. Indian beadwork sparkled from the buckskin vest she was wearing in plain view of the roughnecks who jammed the deck.

And then Jube's eyes spotted something else, something which brought his choleric temper to a boil. A young man in a reddish-brown California-style sombrero was sitting on the driver's seat beside his daughter, his arm over her shoulder.

To make matters worse, the young man waved and shouted something, and then he kissed Sharlott on the cheek. It had sounded like "father-in-law". Damned impudent pup! Jube twisted around and glared up at Tom Buffalo.

"Never thought I'd live to see the day," he grumbled, "when my daughter would behave like that in public with a tinhorn sport. I tell you, boat trips ain't safe for a giddy-headed girl her age. I'd ort to whale the daylights out of Sharlie."

The old Cayuse shrugged, his face inscrutably stolid.

"Squaws all same, red or white," the Indian observed safely. "Hunt buck to share tepee. Your papoose no different."

Coming up in the next issue

Frontier Puritan

Fighting Almost Impossible Odds, Fighting Even Himself, Fearless Marshal Jim Bond Was Out to Clean Up His Town

A Magazine-Length Novel

By CLARK GRAY

Hide-Out on the Poudre

There Was a Wall of Hate and Murder Between Them, and If He Ever Wanted Her, He'd Have to Fight His Way Through

A Novelette

By WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

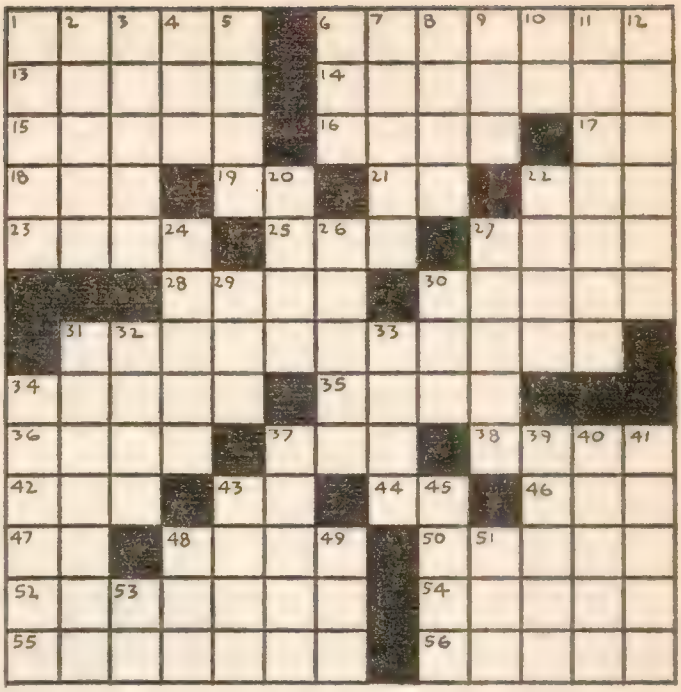
The Sixth Shotgun

Practically Everyone in Town, Including All the Pretty Girls, Adored Leo. They All Turned Out for His Hanging

A Short Story

By LOUIS L'AMOUR

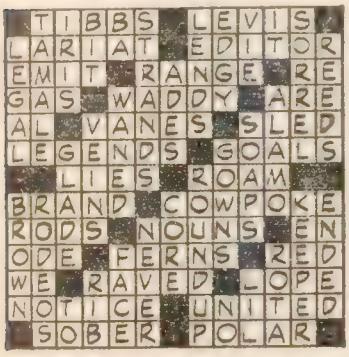
THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



The solution of this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

1. Owner's mark on cattle
6. Saddle attachment
13. Cowboy competitive show
14. Hero's true love
15. Boy's marble
16. Heroic
17. Therefore
18. Eat the evening meal
19. Street (abbr.)
21. Plural ending
22. Energy
23. Collections
25. Solemn fear
27. To distribute cards
28. Game on horseback
30. To make a speech
31. Rodeo performers
34. Out of funds (slang)
35. Fountain drink
36. To relieve
37. To chop
38. Charts
42. For what reason
43. Towards
44. Near
46. Rodent
47. Have being
48. Twisted
50. Cowboy's companion
52. Untanned cattle skin
54. Ascended
55. Landed properties
56. More recent.



Solution to puzzle in preceding issue

DOWN

1. Copper alloy
2. Rascal
3. To adjust
4. Twine fabric
5. Performs
6. The lady
7. Indian tent
8. Spring flower
9. Fabulous bird
10. Rhode Island (abbr.)
11. Throws from a saddle
12. Human beings
20. Baby powder
22. Fleshy fruit
24. Bar on a wheel
26. More unpleasant
27. Vision during sleep
29. Single unit
30. Peculiar
31. Western humped cattle
32. Promising success
33. No. central State
34. Take care!
37. Crowd
39. Indian's weapon
40. Behind the times
41. Western beef animal
43. To taunt
45. In comparison with
48. Exclamation of triumph
49. Word of assent
51. Native mineral
53. Weight (abbr.)

CHAMP'S

WHEN SHE MET the guy, he was exactly what she'd wanted all her life. And so, just like a woman, she immediately started trying to change him all around

"You brought me good luck, honey," he said

CHOICE

By Elsa Barker

BARBARA THATCHER looked up from her typewriter as the office door opened and a wave of cowboy laughter swept in with the dusty wind from the street. There were two of them, one tall and slim waisted, one medium and thick set. Their big hats came off and their laughter quieted at sight of the girl.

Barbara was no different from other girls in that her dark eyes rested longest on the tall, slim one. He was Candy Bill Carrigan, all-round champion deluxe and playboy of the rodeo circuits.

It was the first time he had ever come to the Twin Forks Rodeo, but Barbara had read about him and seen his pictures in plenty of newspapers and magazines. A champ like Candy Bill Carrigan was news wherever he went.

It was reported in the newspapers that he got his nickname "Candy Bill" party because he was a candy cowboy from the female viewpoint, partly because he was supposed to have said frankly he was out for the "big sugar" or the "main candy" in the rodeos. He was principally a bronc rider, but he was also a good all-round cowboy.

Reporters loved him because he was full of fun, always good for a new wisecrack or two, and because he let them take his picture whenever they wanted—usually with a different pretty girl hanging on his arm each time.

Now, although his clothes were travel-stained and his brow beaded with sweat, he was still just about the purtiest he-specimen Barbara had ever seen.

A lock of curly dark brown hair had dropped engagingly down on his forehead. His eyes were big, dark and fringed with the longest lashes she had ever seen on a man. At sight of the girl, his mouth broke into the flashing white-toothed grin that photographed so well.

"Imagine finding anything that purty in a little ol' town like this!" He said it half under his breath, as if he didn't expect the girl to hear.

Barbara pretended she hadn't. She gave both cowboys the same friendly, impartial smile.

"I suppose you're here to sign up for the contests?"

"Yes, ma'am," said the thickset cowboy, as Barbara reached for her record book. "My name's Pete Kornegay. I want to try 'em all. How much?"

Barbara said, "Seventy-five dollars."

He shoved some bills across her desk. "Thanks, miss." He went back outside.

Barbara loked up at the tall cowboy. "Your name?" she asked coolly.

"Bill Carrigan," he said quietly.

Barbara looked at him again. He smiled at her, and now it didn't seem to be the flashing toothsome variety the photographers were so fond of getting. It was just like any nice cowboy might have smiled, and Barbara was ashamed that she had pretended not to know him. The boy might be a little bit of a show-off, but he'd won his reputation by honest hard work and sheer ability.

She smiled back. "Candy Bill Carrigan," she said and wrote it down. "I'll bet you want to enter the bronc riding, bull dogging and calf roping."

She saw that that pleased him. "You picked 'em," he said.

After she had taken his money, he lingered by the desk.

"There'll be a dance in town tonight, I reckon."

"Of course. The hall is—"

"If I'd happen to drop by your place around eight o'clock, ma'am, you reckon you could show me where it is?"

"Oh, you won't have any trouble finding it. The hall is the big building just around the corner."

"I guess I didn't make myself clear, Miss—shucks, I don't even know your name."

Barbara hesitated, then said, "Barbara Thatcher. I already have a date for the dance."

"I might have known it," said Bill Carrigan. He let admiration show plainly in his dark eyes. "You couldn't break that date for a poor, lonesome cowboy in a strange town?"

THE GIRL laughed. "If what I read is true, you won't be lonesome long. Besides, I make it a rule never to date a cowboy that I haven't known at least fifteen minutes."

"I could walk around the block a few times and come back in later."

She laughed and shook her head so that her short, smooth black bobbed hair danced. "No dice."

He looked regretful, but not squelched. "You'll save me a couple of dances?"

Barbara shrugged. "You can have a dance, if you're there to ask for it. There's lots of girls in town, and I'm not so popular that I'm usually dated up for more than three or four ahead."

"I don't believe that," said Bill Carrigan. "Suppose you save me about an hour, say between eleven and twelve."

"I'll save you nothing. Besides, if you intend to ride broncs in this show, you'd better be tucked in your little bed before twelve o'clock."

Bill Carrigan laughed, a pleasant, carefree sound.

"You let me worry about my bronc riding, pretty face. Your job is to start thinking about falling in love with Bill Carrigan."

Barbara's smile began to get a little frosty around the edges, but before she could think of anything properly scathing to answer, he turned for the door.

Big Doak Thatcher, Barbara's father, coming from the street heard part of the last. He gave Candy Bill Carrigan a sharp look, recognizing him from pictures he had seen, but he didn't speak to the young cowboy.

"God's Gift to Women been bothering you, honey?" he asked his daugher, as the door closed.

Barbara smiled. "Not as much as he thought he was. I don't bother easy."

Doak Thatcher was president of the Rodeo Association this year, and now before going on into the back room where the directors were due to meet in fifteen minutes, he planted a hefty hip on the corner of his daughter's desk.

He was a big man, thick muscled, but not fat. Vigorous looking and prosperous at sixty odd, his thick black hair was beginning to be sprinkled with gray, his dark cheeks just beginning to weather and line.

He had married late in life, and his wife had lived only long enough to give him a daughter. Barbara was the apple of his eye, the center of his universe, his excuse for the continued enjoyment of living.

"Don't let him hang around you, baby," he said, referring again to Candy Carrigan. "That kind don't bring a gal nothing but trouble."

Barbara started to protest the flat indictment, then wondered why she should want to defend Bill Carrigan.

She shrugged. "I'm glad he came to Twin Forks this year. He's a top rider, and the crowd will love him."

"See that *you* don't," said Doak Thatcher, and started for the back room. "Or I'm liable to have to polish up my old shootin' iron."

BARBARA'S date for the dance that night was Walt Millwee, a rusty-haired, snub-nosed, freckle-faced cowboy she had known all her life, and liked. When she gave it any thought at all, she supposed that some day she would probably marry Walt, but she wasn't ready to marry anybody yet. She liked being with Walt, she liked dancing with him, she liked and admired the way his mind worked.

Walt was dependable, and had a quiet, unostentatious habit of doing well in anything he decided to tackle. That included bronc riding. Probably he would be Bill Carrigan's toughest competition for first money.

Barbara loved to dance. That evening she talked, laughed, flirted and tried to seem interested in what her partners had to say, but she had the new experience of catching herself letting her eyes drift over to the entry door oftener than she liked.

Barbara had never felt obliged to watch for any man's coming before.

At eleven-thirty she suggested that it was time to leave. Walt Millwee agreed with her gratefully.

He grinned ruefully. "I'll have some pretty tough competition tomorrow. I'd better get some sleep."

He went to get his hat and Barbara's coat from the check stand.

Barbara's eyes drifted over to the door again. She saw Bill Carrigan's tall figure etched against the darkness outside. She saw his eyes sweep the crowd, until they met hers. A smile lighted his face.

The music had started again, and the floor was crowded, but it took him only half a minute to thread his way through to her. His smile seemed to have a very personal gladness in it.

"This dance, Barbara?"

She caught the scent of whisky on his breath and drew back in oddly offended pride at this evidence that he might very well be the devil-may-care roisterer the newspaper stories made him out to be. She also saw that even in a crowded room like this, Bill Carrigan and the girl he had first singled out to ask for a dance were attracting a lot of attention. Color came up into her face.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Walt and I are just leaving."

He grinned at her. "It's early," he said, his tone both confident and confidential. "I've got my car outside. When you get your bronc rider put to bed, how about you and me counting a few stars?"

"Why, from what I've heard, I supposed you already had them all counted!"

"There's a few strays I sure need help on—your kind of help, Barbara."

There was a moment's hesitation, a hesitation that was wanting to go, and knowing that she shouldn't.

"No," Barbara said firmly.

He gave her a long quizzical look, turned and started for the door again.

Walt came back with her coat. "Was that Bill Carrigan?"

"Yes."

"What did he want?"

Barbara shrugged. "To dance. I told him we were leaving."

Walt Millwee looked at the cowboy just going out the door, and his lips tightened.

"Funny he couldn't find some other gal he liked the looks of."

"It is, isn't it?" Barbara agreed sweetly.

She had a strangely light-headed feeling. There was an ache somewhere down inside of her that seemed partly regret, partly excitement, a feeling she had never had before. She was a little frightened, and more than a little ashamed at this knowledge that she was no different from a lot of other girls whom Bill Carrigan had not found too hard to get.

THE NIGHT AIR was cool on her flushed cheeks, but it didn't quell the light-headed feeling. As they turned the corner and headed for the hotel, she noticed that the Montezuma Drugstore was still open, seemingly doing a land office business in cold drinks. Down the street a long, expensive red roadster stood parked close to the hotel.

She touched Walt's arm. "I'm going across and get some aspirin. You might as well go on up to the hotel."

She caught and understood the worried look he gave her.

"Barbara—"

"Go on. There's no use you coming with me. The store's crowded. It may take me a long time to get waited on."

This time he didn't let her stop him. "Barbara, you know what sort Bill Carrigan is?"

She shrugged. "I can read. But right now all I want is to buy a box of aspirin."

Walt gave her another tight-lipped, worried look, then turned for the hotel.

Feeling like a bum, and not really caring very much, Barbara floated across the street. The store was crowded. She spoke brightly to several cowboys and girls she knew, scarcely seeing them at all. She waited patiently for a clerk, bought aspirin, and went across and up the street.

There was a man in the long red car now. A tall cowboy in a big white hat. He saw her coming, got out and opened the door.

Barbara hesitated a moment. She caught the reek of liquor on his breath again, and drew back, the light-headed feeling of excitement suddenly gone, and in its place a letdown feeling of cold disgust.

"You've been drinking, Bill."

"Yes, ma'am," he said. "A couple of shots. Any objections?"

"A champ bronc rider has no business helling around the way you do. Some day you'll get your neck broke."

"Hell, if this is going to be a temperance lecture, maybe we'd better forget the ride."

"Maybe we had," said Barbara, and turned on her heel.

"Barbara—wait!"

But she didn't stop. Inside the lobby, Walt Millwee was sitting in one of the big leather armchairs. Finding that he hadn't gone up to his room, but had waited, probably with the idea of checking up on her, turned her anger on him.

"Walt, don't ever do that again."

He looked at her blandly. "Anyhow, I'm glad you didn't go riding with Carrigan!"

Barbara felt color warm her cheeks. Her dark eyes sparked fire, but "You think you're pretty darned smart, don't you?" was the best she could manage.

AS SECRETARY for the Rodeo Association, and daughter of its president, and because the Arena Director knew she had sense enough to keep out of the way, Barbara was allowed free rein to go where she pleased during the show.

She could have had a good seat in the judges' stand, but instead she chose to perch on the high board fence next to the chutes.

Right from the start it looked like Walt Millwee and Candy Bill Carrigan were pushing each other for first place, with Pete Kornegay crowding them close.

Of the three main events, the calf roping came first. Bill Carrigan's horse, high spirited, and nervous, broke the barrier a fraction of a second before the flag was dropped, and Bill was penalized ten seconds time.

But he caught the calf, flopped him over and tied him so quick that the crowd came to their feet with a cheer. A slim dashing figure even in dark blue shirt and levis, he swept off his big white hat, and gave them his happy-go-lucky grin. From that moment, as far as the crowd was concerned, he had them in his pocket. His total calf time was twenty-two seconds.

Walt Millwee was a shade more cautious, but he was always a good, deliberate roper, rarely if ever missing his first loop, and strong enough to flop and tie a calf to match anybody's record. His time was fifteen seconds. The crowd cheered him,

but not as spontaneously as they had Bill Carrigan. He lifted a hand in brief acknowledgment, caught his horse and rode back to the chutes.

Pete Kornegay made a good, fast catch —time, seventeen seconds.

In the bulldogging they switched leads. Bill Carrigan made a long flying leap from his horse almost as soon as the steer crossed the barrier, the kind of leap where it looked like the chances were a hundred to one that he would miss. But Bill Carrigan made it. He flipped the steer over as if he were a tame pup. The crowd went wild.

Sitting quiet on the fence, Barbara watched Bill take the applause. She couldn't really blame him for liking it, but she wished he didn't like it so much.

Pete Kornegay was second with twelve second. Walt dropped to third place with fifteen.

The saddle bronc riding, by far the most popular eevnt in the Twin Forks Rodeo, was the last thing on the program.

Riding past Barbara's perch on the fence while they waited for the hazers to get the broncs in the chutes, Candy Bill didn't even throw a look her way. His buldogging steer had ripped a long gash in his shirt sleeve and planted a big dirty foot on the brim of his white hat.

On a sudden impulse Barbara called to him softly, "Bill."

Above the noise of the crowd and the yelling of the hazers crowding broncs into the chutes, it didn't seem possible that he could hear her. But as if his ears had been straining for the sound, he turned and rode back to her.

"Good luck, Bill," she said.

He looked at her gravely. "You mean that?"

"Of course."

The Arena Director came riding by. "Get set, Bill. You're second man up, and we're about ready to turn 'em out."

"All right." He looked at Barbara again. "I want to talk to you after the show. Meet me at my car?"

The girl hesitated, then nodded.

Walt Millwee drew a big gray for his ride. It was the kind of strong, straight, punishing bucker that tears a man to pieces, but doesn't give him much chance to make a show.

Walt stayed on and made a good ride, but Barbara noticed, too, that his leg on the judges' side was kicking a lot faster and freer than on the other side. It didn't make it look too good to the crowd, but it lessened his chance of getting thrown, and would almost certainly put him in the day money.

Pete Kornegay made a wild, free ride, only to sail out of the saddle a fraction of a second before the whistle blew.

Candy Bill Carrigan copped first without much trouble. He had drawn a small bay, a rhythmic, twisty, high bucker that looked wild and bad, but wasn't too much trouble for a smart rider to outguess. And

---

Upstanding Character

By LIMERICK LUKE

A dudeen whose first name was Blanche
Rode horseback all day on a ranch.
That night Mexkin Pete
Said: "Her sopper she eat,
Weethout satting down on the banch!"

Bill's long legs, both of them, swiped him from shoulder to flank with every jump.

The crowd, for the third time during the day, gave him a deafening burst of applause. The pickup man took him off the still bucking bronc, he took his bow with a flourish, and came long legging it back toward the chutes.

He stopped in front of Barbara, grinning happily up at her.

"You brought me luck, honey." He suddenly reached up, lifted her off the fence and kissed her. The crowd roared its approval. Here was a champ they liked.

Barbara drew back, her face flaming. "Bill, you've been drinking again. Before a bronc ride!"

Bill Carrigan looked down at her quizzically, his grin fading. He tightened his fingers around her arm.

"Let's get away from this crowd, honey. I think we got things to talk over."

HOLDING her firmly by the arm, he piloted her through the gate, back behind the corrals to where he had left his red roadster. He opened the door and Barbara slid into the seat.

He stood beside her and slowly rolled a smoke. "Now then, let's get this straight. That's twice that you've hung it into me because I'd had a drink. I take it that you think hell and damnation is ready to reach out and grab a man that takes a little nip now and then?"

Barbara's face colored again. "No, I don't," she said sharply. "But I think it's bad—it's stupid—for a champ bronc rider to take a drink before he rides! And I don't like it either when a man takes on a load before he asks me to go for a drive."

"Does this champ stuff mean a lot to you, honey?"

"If a man is going to ride, he ought to ride to win—of course."

Bill Carrigan shook his head at her. "That ain't the way I'm made, Barbara. I ride because I like to. I rope calves because I like to. I bulldog because I like to. I figger that's why I'm a champ. When I quit liking to do those things, then some young squirt that does like 'em will come along an' nose me out of first place, and I won't be a champ any more."

"And I suppose you kiss girls now and then because you like to? And take a drink now and then because you like to?"

"You've got the general idea," said Bill. "But I'm willing to quit kissing the pretty girls, all except one, any time you say the word."

"You mean—"

"I mean I'm in love with you, Barbara. I know it sounds crazy to you. I don't exactly savvy what hit me, myself. But I know I want you. I want to marry you."

"Would you quit drinking?"

He threw down his cigarette, then looked at her straight. In spite of the way she had been thinking of him almost constantly for the past twenty-four hours, Barbara had certainly not thought of him as a man of strong character, nor a hard man. Now the happy-go-lucky look was gone, and there was a steely glint in his eyes.

"If you've got to put conditions on it, to hell with it!" he said shortly.

The shock of that was like a slap of ice water in the face. Barbara started to get out of the car, her eyes hot with tears. She heard her father's sharp voice, "Barbara! Are you ready to go?"

"Yes, Dad," she said quietly.

Bill Carrigan said nothing.

Doak Thatcher took his daughter's arm, paying no attention to the cowboy. "I've got to go out to the ranch tonight, Bobby. You better come with me. You won't mind missing the dance?"

"No," said Barbara. Her face felt hot, but the rest of her, the inside part of her, was cold. She was shaking all over, and she was grateful for her father's warm solid grip on her arm.

On the way home Doak Thatcher talked to his daughter about Bill Carrigan. He was a drunken bum. He was like a sailor, he had a girl in every rodeo town. He was a gambler. With all the money he had made in the past three years, the newspapers said he didn't have a cent saved. A girl would be a fool to tie herself up to a man like that.

Barbara listened quietly a while, then

finally said, "Please, Dad! I told Bill Carrigan all that myself this afternoon. Let's don't talk about it any more."

He threw her a quick, sharp look. "You're in love with the bum, baby?"

"Yes," she said. "I don't like it, but I am. I'm so much in love with him that I hurt all over. I never dreamed that loving could hurt so much. But—but I'll get over it. I know I can, only let's don't talk about it any more."

"All right, baby," he said gently.

BARBARA sat on the front porch of of the Diamond T and watched a pale moon rise slowly in the east, while it was still not quite dark. At least not dark enough not to recognize the long red car when it turned into the lane.

She got up and went into the house.

"Bill Carrigan's coming, Dad. Will you talk to him?"

She went on into the dining room, closed the door to a narrow crack, then stood by the crack.

It didn't take Doak Thatcher long to tell it, but he said more than a mouthful. He wound up by telling Bill Carrigan that he would kill him if he ever caught him hanging around his daughter again.

There was a long moment of silence, and then Bill Carrigan said quietly, "Mr. Thatcher, if you was thirty years younger, and if you was talking about any other gal in the world, I'd have a try at pinning back your ears, and blabbing your tongue. As it is, I guess you've laid it on the taw line, and there ain't much I can say—except that the most of them newspaper stories about me that you and Barbara have read are about nine-tenths hot air. I've lived twenty-four years, and I've had a hell of a good time doing it. I expect I can still manage to have a hell of a good time without your daughter. Good night, sir."

Barbara tiptoed up the back stairs and into bed, where she lay shaken with misery, icy cold inside. Along toward morning she fell into a light, restless sleep broken by unhappy tormented dreams of a dark-eyed smiling cowboy, with a voice that could go oddly gentle, and then hard as steel. . . .

At the second day's show, Candy Bill Carrigan was as hot as a firecracker, topping out first place easily in all three main events.

His calf roping time was ten seconds. Bulldogging time again five. And he rode a squealing, sun-fishing, twisting, high-bucking big black bronc to a standstill, his spurs raking rhythmically wild and free from shoulder to flank.

Barbara, sitting sedately in the judges' stand today, watched him pick up his big white hat where it had fallen, slap arena dust from it, and wave it at the cheering crowd.

Then he came long legging it, swagger in the set of his shoulders, and the cock of his hat, back to the chutes. This time he pulled pretty little Juanita Melendez, a trick rider, off the fence, kissed her soundly, and when she smiled and kissed him back, he stood holding her hand for a moment, then finally led her through the back gate and out of sight.

Barbara sat and watched, her face pinched and white with misery, her heart sick with a jealousy she was ashamed of.

The crowd started spilling out of the grandstand, Doak Thatcher touched his daughter's arm.

"Damn good show today, baby. Ready to go?"

Barbara let him help her down the steep steps, and around the corrals to their car, and again she was grateful for the solid, comforting feel of his hand on her arm.

THE THIRD day's show caught Bill Carrington off stride. It took him eighteen seconds to bed his steer down, twenty to catch and tie his calf. But his good time the other two days assured him of first money finals in the bulldogging, second in the calf roping.

Up in the judges' stand, Barbara heard the laughter, the grunts and occasional swearing as cowboys crowded saddle broncs in the chutes again. Some of the broncs squealed wildly, shaking the judges' stand above them as they kicked viciously at the stout chutes holding them captive.

Candy Bill Carrigan was hunkered down by the fence, smoking a cigarette. Always wherever he was, there was a group of younger, admiring roustabouts who hoped some day to be the kind of champ Bill Carrigan was.

Walt Millwee drifted past, stopped to talk a minute. Candy Bill stood up. He pulled a flat flask out of his pocket, offered it to Walt. Walt shook his head. Bill took a long drink himself, passed it to a couple of his admirers, then tipped it to his lips again and drained the bottle.

Sitting by his daughter in the judges' stand, Doak Thatcher looked at the girl's white face and swore.

"The damned young fool," he growled. "We could throw him out of the contests for that." He turned to the other judges. "What's Carrigan's ride number today?"

"Five," somebody told him.

"Couldn't we have him shifted to first place? He's got a bad horse today. Time that liquor hits him it'll be murder."

The judge shook his head. "We can let him ride and please the crowd, or we can rule him out. But we're running a rodeo, not a day nursery. He'll have to ride his turn."

Walt Millwee rode a bad bronc as he always rode—competently and deliberately, the leg that the judges could see, scratching wide and free. But when it was over he got only a spattering of applause from the crowd.

Pete Kornegay was next. He made a good, hard ride, possibly first money.

The next two riders both got thrown, but managed to fall free of the broncs' flashing hoofs, and roll to safety.

Bill Carrigan's number was called.

Barbara closed her eyes. "Dear God," she prayed under her breath. "Please let it be all right. Don't let him get hurt."

She kept her eyes closed when she heard the chute gate bang open and the bronc's squeal as he lunged out. She kept them closed at the first wild yell from the crowd. Her father's hand clamped tight on her arm.

The crowd's first thunderous yell changed to a groan. Barbara's eyes flew open, just before Bill Carrigan hit the ground hard.

He lay for a split second before he tried to roll free. Too long. A flashing hoof seemed to strike him. His body quivered, his knees drew up into a contorted, pain-wracked hunch, and he lay still.

BARBARA was on her feet, feet that seemed like rubber, they moved so slowly and clumsily. It seemed to take her a year to run down the steps. Another year to reach the gate. She heard the ambulance siren, somebody barred her way at the gate to the arena. By the time she fought her way through, the ambulance had whizzed out of the arena again, and raced away toward town, its siren screaming.

Barbara turned and ran for her father's car.

The nurse in the waiting room at the hospital seemed strangely calm and unconcerned.

"What name, please?"

Barbara drew a deep breath, trying to gather her panicked wits into some kind of reason.

"Barbara Thatcher. I want to see Bill Carrigan. They—they just brought him in. He—he was hurt out at the rodeo."

"Wait here a minute, please. They just brought him in, I think. I don't know how badly he's hurt. I'll ask if you can see him."

In a few minutes she was back, her pleasant face impersonally smiling.

"He's conscious, Miss Thatcher. Not really badly hurt. Hit his head when he fell, and seems to have a knee knocked out of joint. But he's asked not to have any visitors."

Barbara caught her breath sharply, and took a step forward. "But I—"

The nurse's solid bulk blocked her. "Especially you, Miss Thatcher!" she said firmly.

Barbara caught her breath again, a sound that was half a sob. "Oh," she said quietly. "Will you tell him I came?"

"Yes, of course."

The next day when Barbara called at the hospital again, Bill Carrigan had checked out. He had collected what money

was due him and left town, leaving no address where he might be reached.

For a time Barbara lived with the faint hope that he would write at least once, but as the weeks marched on and she had no word, that hope dwindled, faded and finally died.

Walt Millwee asked her to marry him, but she put him off with a vague promise of perhaps. Some day, she thought, she might learn to like Walt enough to risk marriage, but not now while this other wound was still so raw and aching.

She subscribed to all the rodeo magazines she could learn of, in the hope that she might hear something of Candy Bill Carrigan, but though she read them carefully, it was months before she saw his name again. Then she learned that he had won third money in the bronc riding at a little rodeo in Idaho.

After that she saw his name oftener. Third money here, second money another place, and once he rated first, but always at the little shows, never as a champ at the big ones.

Slowly she began to piece it together in her mind. Bill had told her he rode because he liked it. He was a champ because he liked riding. She hoped, and began to believe because she hoped, that this meant Bill had been as badly hurt as she was.

Finally she saw in an Albuquerque paper that Candy Bill Carrigan was going to ride at the Fort Sumner Rodeo. It was a short item, little more than an inch on an inside page, with no picture. Fort Sumner was a small town, and Candy Bill Carrigan wasn't big news these days.

Barbara carried the paper in to her father.

"Dad, I've got to see Bill again. I've got a hunch—maybe it's just a hope—that he's changed some. But I've got to see him. I promise I'll be sensible. If it's no good, I'll come back. And maybe some day I'll marry Walt, like you want me to."

Doak Thatcher gave his daughter a long look. He had lived for nearly a year with the girl's white, unhappy face. He had seen her growing thinner, he had seen that nothing was any fun for her any more.

He sighed. "All right. I'll go with you."

"But, Dad—I—"

"I won't go to the show with you. I won't interfere with you talking to him alone. But I'll be around some place, in case you need me."

Barbara put her arms around him, kissed the top of his thatch of salt and pepper hair, and saw with a regretful little pang that it was more salt than pepper these past few months. "Thanks, Dad."

AND SO she sat in a grandstand and watched another rodeo. She saw Bill Carrigan tie a calf in twenty and a half seconds, bulldog a steer in eighteen. Neither of them was good enough for first or even second day money at this comparatively small rodeo.

She watched him ride a bronc—like Walt Millwee rode broncs, without any dash and flourish, tight legged toward the crowd, scratching mostly on whichever side turned toward the judges.

He got only a casual spattering of applause from the audience, which he didn't even acknowledge. She saw that he limped a little as he made his way back to the chutes.

Barbara looked at her program, saw that there were three more bronc rides still to come. She got up and made her way out of the stand.

Outside, she walked along the long line of parked cars, until she finally spotted a long red roadster, a roadster mud spattered and shabby looking now, with a nicked fender or two. She got in and sat down.

It was ten minutes before she saw him coming. The battered big white hat sat his curly head at the old jaunty angle, but he limped as he walked, and his shoulders had none of their old swagger.

Quick, shamed tears stung her eyes, so that she couldn't be quite sure that his old delighted, happy-go-lucky grin flashed out for a second when he saw her. Then his face sobered as he came on.

He came around to her side of the car, and started to build a smoke.

"You're thinner, honey. Ain't your pa been feeding you good?"

Barbara tried to smile. "You've changed, Bill. I saw you ride today, and—"

He looked at her gravely. "I told you how it was, baby. A champ's got to like to ride. It ain't much fun any more. Nothing's much fun. Bronc riding's just a way of making money to buy beans for me and hay for my hoss."

Barbara stared down at her hands, clasped them tight together so that they wouldn't shake.

"Bill—"

"I banged up my knee that last day at Twin Forks. It bothers me some. But the main thing is I made a damned fool of myself that day— and I reckon it was good for me."

"Bill—"

He grinned at her. "I ain't kissed another girl nor taken a drink since that day, baby."

"Bill—"

"Yes, honey."

"You've changed a lot in a year. Have you—have you—"

"Have I what?"

"You—you told me once that you loved me. Have you—I mean—"

Candy Bill Carrigan opened the car door, lifted her out and pulled her close to him. He kissed her long and hard, with no crowd watching to laugh and cheer.

"Honey," he said huskily, "I ain't a champ any more. But I feel good again. Awful good. Maybe good enough to hit the champ trail again some day."

Barbara's eyes clouded a little as she looked up at him. "But, Bill, if you do—"

Candy Bill Carrigan's laugh was warm. "Don't worry, honey. I haven't tried to make a whisky ride nor taken a downtown load since I was fool enough to walk out on you at Twin Forks—and I don't aim to. Furthermore, I'll promise—"

"Bill!" Barbara's hands cradled his cheeks between them. "I've learned my lesson, too. You don't have to promise me anything!"

"Except to love you, and do all my kissing at home," said Candy Bill Carrigan earnestly. "Like this!"

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. The Karankawa Indians, said at one time to have been cannibalistic, originally inhabited the Gulf Coast in what state?

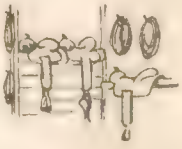
2. Lots of tourists drive to Mexico City these days. How far would you say it is from Laredo, Texas, on the Border: 560, 760, 960 or 1760 miles?

3. I heard a cowboy tell another he'd better "dally his tongue." What did he mean?

4. Of the cinnamon, Alaska brown and grizzly bears, which two are most similar to each other in build, claws and habits?

5. How many fawns does a doe antelope usually have?

6. You hear of the tackroom at race tracks and the term is also sometimes used on cow ranches. What does it mean?



7. What did old-time trail drivers mean by "Red River alligators" or "Cimarrón alligators"?

8. Which makes the more pointed track, the hoof of a deer or the hoof of a sheep?

9. Is the tail of a jackrabbit mostly white or mostly black, or is it white on some varieties of jacks, black on others?

10. Which is correct for the horny projections above the back of the hoof on cattle and some other cloven-hoofed animals, dew-claw or jew-claw?

—Rattlesnake Robert

You will find the answers to these questions on page 116. **Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.**

"Don't take it seriously if Dulcie smiles at you," she said

A Cowboy in Time

By Kenneth L. Sinclair

TRENNA WAYNE perched on the edge of the big rock and swished her slim legs around in the pool. She kicked, sending up showers of silvery droplets. This was plumb cooling and enjoyable after all the hard work of cutting poles for the new house that the Walking W was going to have. She'd taken off her boots and hiked her skirt above her knees and now she debated going in for a real swim.

It was perfectly safe, of course. This whole canyon was Walking W property, and nobody ever came up here anyway. The nearest man-critter on the whole big landscape was old Vinegar Bill Jenks, puttering about on his ranch three miles away.

But then she heard the cheery whistle. She yipped and jumped up, pulling at her

---

SHE THOUGHT the drifter might solve some of her problems—until he became the biggest one

skirt, and shoved her feet hastily into her boots. She faced up canyon and saw a long-geared young stranger come around the bend.

He was leading a horse and he peered up at the canyon walls with an expression of innocence that was plumb overdone. Then his smiling eyes lighted upon Trenna and his surprised look was also overdone. He said, "Why, howdy!"

Trenna gulped. She said, "Where'd you come from?"

"Up there." He gestured vaguely toward the canyon, but he kept looking at Trenna.

She put her hands on her hips and blew a lock of coppery hair from her forehead. "Mister, you're a liar! That whole canyon up there is full of rocks as big as houses. Nobody's ever been up there. Dad tried to get through once to take a look at the up-and-down scenery he'd bought, and couldn't make it. You couldn't get twenty feet beyond that bend there!"

The hombre grinned. "Shows you don't know old Pete Barker, miss. I was on the other side of them mountains and heard there was a purty gal over here, so I just trained some eagles to carry me."

"And your horse too, I suppose! Say, you *are* a liar."

"Yup. Prevaricatin' Pete, they call me. Seems like every time I see a purty gal I just got to start telling 'em tall."

Trenna felt herself blush. He hadn't come down the canyon at all. He'd come up, sneaking past her while she—Then she recalled what she'd been about to do, and blushed some more.

"What on earth are you doing here?" she cried.

"Just sashaying around the country. Seeing the sights."

She choked back a retort and scanned his face narrowly. He grinned right back at her, unabashed. He seemed to be just on the far side of twenty and his jaw had a lean strength and he was mighty tanned. The way he used his eyes, she decided, was pretty bold, but kind of nice.

Certainly he was an odd galoot. Her sister Dulcie, who should know, maintained that all men were liars, and here was one that admittted his lying straight-out. It was the first time Trenna had run up against such a specimen.

She said, "It must take a lot of money to go soldierin' around the country like that. Are you rich or something?"

HE PUSHED back his hat, revealing that he had wavy brown hair. He looked solemn. He said, "Miss, I ain't one to brag, but likely I'm the richest hombre in Arizona. Got a copper mine and a big ranch up by Flagstaff and another one on the Verde, and more cows than I can count."

"Whoa," she said, laughing.

She'd been thinking that if he was rich it would serve him right to get roped by her sister, who had large ideas about solving the Walking W's troubles all at one whack. But now she clasped her hands behind her and prowled around him like she'd seen ranchers do when inspecting a horse. She stopped and ticked off the points on her fingers.

"Your boots are about to fall apart. That gun looks like you got it off a trash heap somewhere. Your hat's a ruin, your shirt is patched, and that saddle's held together with hope and haywire. And you sure do look hungry. You're one of those what-do-you-call-ems—a grubliner."

"You got me tallied, miss. You're a sharp one, even if you are purty as a spotted pony and your nose has a snippy upturn and a scattering of freckles. Seems like you're kind of new to this country."

She nodded crossly and told him her name. "We came west last year," she explained. "Dad bought some range and a whopping chunk of these no-good mountains and started a ranch. He—he died last winter. This spring, when the snow melted in the mountains, my sister and I had lots of luck. All of it bad.

"A big flood came down this canyon and washed out our corrals and floated away our hay and drowned a bunch of our stock. And wrecked our house for good measure. But the Walking W aims to do its duty—we'll feed you. That's what ranchers are

supposed to do, isn't it, when a grubliner comes along?"

The cowboy grinned down at her. "Wouldn't think of it," he said, "unless there's something I can do to help you out. Next best to telling lies to purty gals, I like to help 'em out of fixes. If you want, I'll shove these Thunder Mountains a few miles farther away from your ranch so when the snows melt it won't flood you out."

"There you go again," Trenna said, a delicious mischief stirring within her. "You're going to earn your grub, but not that way. See all those poles over there? I've got a wagon down the canyon a way. I couldn't get it any farther up, so now you're going to pay for your supper by lugging the poles down to it."

The hombre lugged poles. He lugged them all afternoon, making dozens of trips up and down the canyon. When he came staggering to the wagon with the last load, Trenna had the team hitched and ready to go.

She suppressed a giggle. "You'd make a good mule," she commented. "Maybe if we could get some blinders for you so you'd be safe to have around—"

Too late, she saw that she'd goaded him too far. His long arms grabbed her and he planted a kiss on her startled mouth. He didn't seem nearly so done-in as he had a minute ago. The pressure of his arms about her slim waist made her catch her breath. Her heart kicked around like a frisky bronc. Her lips clung to his.

She gasped, "Whoa!" and pushed away. "You've got me mixed up with my sister. She's the siren of the outfit."

"I don't know your sister." He smiled and made another reach that she barely evaded. "Right now I'm looking at the purtiest gal I ever seen, and let me tell you I've seen some purty ones. Why, that rich little widow over in Benson, that wanted me to marry her, she was so purty they stopped all the trains so people could look at her. Conductor told me it had boosted passenger business three hundred per cent."

Trenna wrinkled her nose at him. "Why didn't you stay there, then?"

"Because I knowed I'd find a purtier one—and I have!"

Trenna backed away, glancing down at her mannish shirt and the plain denim skirt that hugged her hips. Not being blind and deaf and ignorant, she knew that her figure had been a magnet for admiring looks and whistles on this Lightning range.

But it was Dulcie, carefully primped and sheathed in fancy dresses, who set the cowboys to stomping. Let 'em stomp, Trenna had always thought. Somebody's got to be practical and get this wreck of a ranch back on its feet.

She gave Pete Barker a commanding look. "Climb on your horse," she said, "and trail along to the house. It's chuck time, cowboy."

"Eating," he said as he swung into his saddle, "is the thing I'm best at, next to telling lies. Why, one time when I won the pie-eating contest over at—"

Trenna whipped up her team, and the rattle of the old wagon kept her from hearing the rest of that one.

THE WALKING W house had started out big. There was a wide porch and a stone fireplace that would take wood as long as a man. Vinegar Bill Jenks had growled about Trenna's father building right at the mouth of the canyon—Bill's own house, at the mouth of the next canyon, was perched prudently on a knoll. But Bill's canyon flooded every spring, and even the Indians agreed that Boulder Canyon never had flooded. The house got built right here, where there was a view.

And then the spring flood came down Boulder Canyon with a roar and boosted the house partly off its foundation, swinging it around so that it parted company with the fireplace.

Now it was a splintered wreck, hanging askew. There was a mud line that reached the top of the windows on the low side. Trenna reckoned it wasn't safe, but they had to live somewhere. She had scrubbed mud out of the inside and they had moved back in, to stay until she could get a new house built.

Dulcie was waiting, a winsome figure on

the canted porch, when Trenna and Pete arrived. Her off-the-shoulder dress didn't look very practical against this background of ruin, but it hugged her interestingly here and there. From the kitchen came a smell of burned potatoes.

Trenna waved a hand at her sister and looked at Pete Barker. "All right, cowboy, start breathing hard and telling lies. His name is Pete, Dulcie. He flew across the mountains on a trained eagle, he says. And he's very darn broke."

Dulcie smiled prettily in spite of that last pointed warning. Pete scratched his head and said, "I'm seeing double. There can't be two such purty gals in all creation."

Dulcie touched her glossy blond hair, which certainly didn't need touching. "Light down and come in, Pete," she invited. "The spuds got burned while I was fixing my hair, but you can make out."

Trenna and Pete washed up on the back porch. The bench was propped up at one end to make it level, but Pete was a vigorous washer and he splashed soapy water on the floor, which caused him to lose his footing and slide down the slope. He came scrambling back up, braced himself against the rail, and grabbed a towel.

"You get used to that," Trenna said. "And don't take it seriously if Dulcie smiles at you one minute and kicks your shin the next. She's kind of bitter about men at the moment. She was all set to marry a guy and darned if the varmint didn't run out on her."

AFTER supper they sat on the porch and watched the moon rise. Dulcie sat at the low end of the bench with the arm rest to support her. Pete kept sliding down toward her. Trenna perched on the high end, feeling forlorn as a rabbit without ears, and morosely counted the blisters she'd gotten from all that pole-chopping.

Just as she finished counting, she saw old Vinegar Bill ride into the yard and dismount in his usual creaky fashion. He was a little old hellion with white whiskers and very blue eyes with which he inspected all the cowboys who came calling here.

He came up on the porch and shook hands with Pete and said, "Watch yourself, cowboy. Me, I'm these gals' guardeen."

"You old fake," Trenna said. "Who appointed you?"

"Appointed myself." He crooked a blunt finger at her. "You come here a minute, young lady. Want to talk to you." He led her out into the flood-rutted yard. "I see you're wearing a proper skirt," he observed. "Like I told you to."

Trenna smoothed the skirt. Her eyes strayed back to the porch, where Dulcie and Pete were talking and getting along just fine. They were, she thought, sitting closer together than was strictly necessary. Must be gravity, or something.

She said to old Bill, "I didn't wear it because you told me to. It just happened I wasn't riding a horse today."

"When you do, you get one of them riding skirts. I don't tolerate no gal wearing man's riggin' on this here range. You go to doing it again and I'll get me one of them Scotchman's skirts and wear it to get even."

Trenna laughed and stole another look at the porch and became very sober again. "You old dear," she said affectionately, "you've got more than that foolishness on your mind, to come riding clear over here."

"Yup. Where'd this Barker blow in from?"

"From over the mountains, he says. And he's been blowing ever since."

Vinegar Bill snorted. "Don't look like a blow-hard, but you never can tell by what they look like. Hitting it off with Dulcie, though, ain't he? What you ought to do is catch yourself a young hombre, Trenna. Gal like you, purty as a jumping trout, nineteen years old—"

"Ha!" Trenna said. "I'm kind of busy right now, or hadn't you noticed? With a washed-out ranch on my hands, and no money—"

"Been wondering about that there flood," old Bill said, scratching his head. "Every year before, it come down my canyon. This year it come down yours. Why the switch?"

He turned and looked up toward the

mountains that reared darkly in the moonlight. Then he turned suddenly back to Trenna. "Say, has that Mockton hombre showed up here lately? I hear tell he's been seen in town again. He's the coming-and-goingest hombre I ever did hear of."

"He sure was going when he lit out of here," Trenna said. "And I saw you talking with your jaw stuck out just before he left, too. You old meddler, I'll bet you ran him off!"

But you couldn't pin Vinegar Bill down.

He mumbled something about chores and climbed on his horse and got out of there.

About midnight, Dulcie put aside the corn Trenna had popped and yawned charmingly. Pete took the hint. He got up, forgetting about the tilt of the porch, and nearly fell over.

"Reckon I better drift," he said. "If I could sleep in your bunkhouse tonight—"

"Hop to it," Trenna said. "You'll find it down the wash a couple miles, tipped over and full of mud and packrats."

"Trenna," Dulcie scolded, "don't be snippy. We've got that extra room right here in the house, and he's welcome to use it."

"Yup," Trenna said. "But don't go to jumping around in there, cowboy. You might tip over the whole shebang."

SHE WAS a long time getting to sleep. A dozen things kept buzzing in her head. Clem was back. Dulcie and Pete sure could harmonize on cowboy songs, their heads close together and Dulcie's silvery soprano voice cutting capers high above Pete's firm baritone.

Dulcie was just amusing herself with the stony broke hombre, of course—which served him right, in a way, for his lies. What Dulcie really wanted was Clem. And Trenna was practical enough to admit that his dinero sure would ease the situation around here.

Well, she thought, why not give things a little shove? A touch of jealousy had put the spurs to more than one hombre. Get Clem out here and let him see Pete making time, and maybe Clem would get up gumption enough to defy that meddlesome old Vinegar Bill.

Next morning, after Dulcie got into her gabardine riding rig and went out to show Pete the ranch, Trenna put on her levis and rode into town.

Lightning wasn't much of a place. There was a general store, a saddle shop and a few other business buildings, and a big hotel that somebody had built here by mistake. The hotel was turned crosswise to everything else and blocked the end of the street. Clem was sitting on its porch where he could watch everything that went on in the town, and he was smoking a long cigar.

He seemed kind of wary, Trenna thought, as she rode up. She said, "Hi, stranger. Long time no see. We thought maybe the Indians had taken your scalp."

Clem got up and took off his hat and put his hands on the porch rail. He was a tall young hombre with a one-sided smile and sideburns and fine clothes, town-style. His long, smooth hands showed nary a rope-burn.

He'd often said that when he found just the right ranch to buy he'd grab it, regardless of price. But he sure didn't intend to do any of the rough work himself. Why bother, he maintained, when cowboys came

at forty a month? At least, Trenna had always reckoned, he was plumb frank about it.

He said, "I—had to go away on a trip. Business, you know."

"Yeah," Trenna said. "I know. Well, Dulcie'll be glad to hear that you didn't get scalped."

He seemed uneasy. "There hasn't been any scalping done since the Eighties. And anyway, I didn't go far, just to Hardrock, on the other side of the mountains. On mining busness."

"Well," Trenna said, "I've got to get on to the store. We're going to throw a feed tonight. To celebrate."

"Celebrate what?" Clem asked.

"Oh, something or other. Why don't you drop by? You're not the kind to pay any attention to the way old Vinegar Bill growls around, are you?"

"Of course not. My leaving was a matter of business, entirely."

Business. Trenna was getting tired of that word. She reined her horse away, then mentioned casually over her shoulder, "You'll have a little competition tonight. Dulcie's got a new hombre hanging around. He's not in your class, though. Just a plain ordinary cowboy."

In the store she spent five minutes picking out a little order of groceries, and twenty minutes arguing with the proprietor over the way her bill was piling up. Then, with the grub in a sack tied to the saddlehorn, she jogged out of town.

She reckoned that she'd lit a fuse under Clem Mockton. She was beginning to wonder whether he was worth the powder, but after all, it wasn't her job to criticize the hombre her sister had picked. She said to herself, "I hope this works!"

IT WORKED like a runaway going downhill. Clem drove up to the Walking W that evening in a spanking new buggy with shiny yellow wheels. He was all decked out and he smelled of barber shop and his manners were polished to a high gloss.

He made poor shaggy Pete, who needed a haircut and who always grabbed the wrong tool at the table, look like something a flood would leave hanging in a tree. Trenna's heart swelled with pity for Pete, then glowed with pride when he didn't take it lying down.

He told 'em tall and frisky, until he had everybody around the table laughing—though Clem's laughter was icily polite.

Pete told about the time he stole a famous nightingale from her cardsharp sweetheart, and borrowed a Wells Fargo coach to take her riding. The cardsharp, he said, rented a fast horse and got ahead of them and sawed down a bridge where the road crossed a canyon.

"Time I got that chariot topped, the lead team's front feet was right at the edge of the cliff. And what did that boy friend of hers do but get the mean notion of rolling a big rock down the hill so it would hit us. The lady grabbed me around the neck and screamed and begged me to save her."

Clem's sideburned cheeks held angry color. "Well?" he demanded. "What did you do?"

Pete wielded a toothpick and looked at Clem, grinning.

"Why," he drawled, "I took a couple of catch ropes I happened to have with me and lassoed two trees on the other side of the canyon. At first I was aiming to pull the trees down and drive across on 'em, but then I noticed they wasn't tall enough to reach across. So I just drawed the ropes tight and fastened 'em to what was left of the bridge and drove across on 'em. Gal wanted me to marry her, but I told her I reckoned not. You know, she was inclined to tell fibs now and then, and me being an honorable man, of course I couldn't have a wife like that."

Dulcie and Trenna howled with laughter. Clem scowled. He said, "Impossible."

Dulcie's eyes were very bright. She kept a straight face, somehow, as she said, "Of course it's possible. If the ropes were the right distance apart for the wheels to run on them—"

"Oh shut up, Dulcie," Clem snapped, without taking his angry eyes from Pete. "If you only had some sense to go with your looks you wouldn't let this galoot sit

here and monopolize all your attention."

"Well!" said Dulcie.

Pete got up. "Mister, there's a lot of room outside. You and me'll go put some of it to use."

Clem rose, and the two men faced each other and then swung toward the door. Trenna held her breath and watched her scheme fall to pieces. If anybody got licked, she knew, it wouldn't be that rangy, capable-looking Pete.

But Dulcie circled the end of the table and grabbed Pete's arm.

"Don't be silly, boys," she said. "Pete, you're taking me for a ride in the moonlight. In the Walking W buckboard, if it'll hang together long enough." She laughed gaily. "Maybe we can find a canyon and cross it on ropes."

When they were gone Clem sank into his chair and stared at his plate. Trenna said weakly, "Now how did that explosion happen?"

But the moment the question popped out of her mouth she knew the answer to it. Dulcie had gotten even with Clem for the way he'd jilted her. Trenna's scheme had backfired proper, and now Dulcie and Pete were out riding in the moonlight. Dulcie's hair would be gleaming like spun gold. And she was wearing that blue silk dress of hers tonight. Poor Pete wouldn't have much chance.

Then, suddenly, Trenna savvied the real reason why she'd cooked up her ill-fated scheme. It wasn't just that she'd wanted to help Dulcie land the rich hombre. Deep down, her hope had been that Dulcie would go back to Clem and then maybe Pete would notice that little old Trenna was still around. Like the way he'd noticed her there in the canyon.

Her heart squeezed into a knot. She knew that she loved that long-geared, grinning hombre. Lies and all.

Clem got up, saying, "I'll fix that hombre. I'll fix him proper," and stamped out. But the remark didn't really register with Trenna there. She just wanted to bawl. When she heard the buggy drive away, she did bawl.

Having a flooded-out ranch was a worry. But having man trouble and being all wound up with jealousy was, she was finding out, a whole heap worse.

WHEN SHE got up next morning, Pete was gone. Dulcie was fussing around in the kitchen, scraping the black off some pancakes that had gotten burned. She said that Pete's horse had been stolen from the makeshift corral and that Pete had borrowed one of theirs to follow the sign.

Trenna gasped and wobbled across the canted floor and sank into a chair. "Oh, gosh," she said weakly. "That doggoned Clem. I should have warned Pete last night. But it seemed like you two would never get back, and I reckon my noggin wasn't working too good anyway. So I just went to bed."

"Warned him?" Dulcie said. "About what?"

"Never mind, sister dear."

After all, Trenna reflected, Dulcie *was* her sister even if she was now her deadliest competition. No use worrying her. This was a matter that needed the attention of a practical person and needed it quick. Stealing a man's horse was a sure way to get him riled up so he'd go tearing along the trail and ride right into a trap and maybe get killed.

She just knew that was the way Clem Mockton would work it. She ran back to her bedroom and got into her riding levis and tied a scarf over her coppery hair.

When she went sailing through the kitchen Dulcie yelled at her—something about breakfast—and Trenna yelled back, "Never mind that now. I've got to take care of something pronto. You stay here and keep looking pretty."

She threw a saddle on a horse and rode at a fast gallop to old Vinegar Bill's place. She had to have help, or at least the loan of a gun. All the weapons on the Walking W had been ruined by the flood.

But old Bill wasn't anywhere around his place. She hollered when she rode up the knoll to his house and then she dismounted and pounded on his door No answer.

She ran down to the corrals and hollered

again, thinking that he might be sleeping off his meddlesomeness in the shade somewhere. Still no Vinegar Bill.

She debated going back up to the house and busting into it in search of a gun, but shook her head. She didn't know where he kept them, or even if he had any. Come to think of it, she never had seen him carry one. Maybe he figured he was ornery enough to do without.

Going back to her lathered horse she mounted again and headed back to the Walking W. Half a mile from the house she picked up the trail of three horses, one of which had been led, its sign obscured here and there by that of a single horse that had followed.

That last one would be Pete's borrowed mount. The trail swung into the foothills that skirted the base of the mountains.

"I got him into this," Trenna breathed as she followed the trail. "Got to get him out." If only she could catch up with him in time, warn him about what Clem had said.

SHE URGED her mount to a faster pace. A sound like distant thunder came to her ears. It came from the mountains, as it so often did even on perfectly clear days like this one. The Indians said it wasn't thunder at all. They claimed it was made by the big rocks that demons up there rolled down on folks who tried to go in.

You couldn't get an Indian to go within a mile of those mountains. Maybe Clem was aiming to make use of their legend. Maybe he was going to roll rocks down on Pete and then let folks think the demons did it. Trenna's heart squeezed into a tight lump.

The trail swung straight toward the mountains. She shuddered, but told herself firmly that the legend was a lot of hooey, that there was some perfectly natural explanation for the noises that came out of the mountains. Vinegar Bill had said that the wind might cause them by roaring around rocks and setting up echoes.

Anyway, the important thing was to catch up with Pete. But Trenna suddenly realized that she had lost the trail. She reined up and twisted in her saddle, peering around. She circled widely, but had to go back a quarter mile to find the trail again.

And then, on rocky ground, she lost it once more.

This time she lost it completely. Though she kept trying for maybe an hour, in the hot sun, she couldn't find where that trail went to. It was as if something had picked the horses and riders right off the ground. Pete's trained eagles, maybe.

She giggled, and then said aloud, "Whoa, Trenna! This heat, or something, is getting you hysterical."

Horses didn't get picked up into the air. It was just that on this expanse of baking rock they wouldn't leave any tracks at all. Or at least not any that she could see.

This was a job for trained trackers. A job for the law. She wheeled her horse around and headed for town. . . .

But when she reached Lightning she couldn't get the law, in the person of Sheriff Opie Lang, much interested. The sheriff was a fat hombre with a mustache and extra chins that wiggled when he laughed, which was often. He seemed to think Trenna's excitement was plumb funny. He leaned his bulk back in his swivel chair and slapped his fat thigh.

He said, "Begging your pardon, Miss Trenna, but this is just the kind of deal some giddy gal would cook up. If you expect me to go running around on some wild-goose chase—"

"I didn't cook up anything," Trenna yelled. "I've told you just what happened. Now get out of that chair, you fat walrus, and do something. We taxpayers have got a right to—"

He leaned forward. "Since when," he inquired, "did your taxes get paid? Anyway, Clem Mockton's always got plenty dinero to spend. Why'd he take to stealing horses?"

"I told you. He was jealous."

The sheriff rolled his eyes toward the ceiling. "Gals!" he groaned. "Well, suppose he was. That don't mean he'd go to killing on acount of it. If I went scurrying

around to investigate every fool prank that's pulled off by lovesick hombres I'd be wore to a shadow."

"It'd be some shadow!" Trenna shouted bitterly. Then she got out of there.

Just as she swung into her saddle, she saw old Vinegar Bill Jenks ride wearily into town. He was all dusty and his horse seemed done in. He headed for the water trough and let the animal drink. Trenna yelled and rode over there and jumped down.

Old Bill dismounted stiffly and glared at her levis. "Warned you 'bout wearing them things. If I wasn't too tired to paddle you—"

"You old meddler," she cried. "Why don't you ever meddle at the right time? Where were you this morning when I needed help? Claim to be our guardian, and then go sashaying off somewhere—"

"Calm down," the rancher ordered. "I kept wondering howcome them canyons of ours got crossed up on their flooding this spring, so I taken a ride to find out. Knowing I couldn't get up either canyon on account of the rocks that's piled in 'em I went around to the Hardrock side and went in from there. What I found out, among other things, is that you're rich. Or will be."

"Just like a man," she said bitterly. "Galivanting off somewhere when he's needed—huh? Did you say *rich?*"

"I didn't say nothing else."

"Ha! Now you're telling tall ones. At your age!"

"Nope. When your old man bought that up-and-down mountain country I figured he was crazy. Turns out it was lucky. There's a miner working up there, name of Kennedy. Went into the mountains from the other side and started digging in the bottom of my canyon. His dynamite's been making them noises we heard.

"Well, he got 'way into the mountan and found a vein of gold. Figured he could work it easier from your canyon, which runs close to mine up there, so he punched his tunnel on through. This spring the water from my canyon went gushing through that tunnel of his and went on down your canyon. Piled up behind rocks somewheres, likely, then busted loose with a bang. Point is, that mine's on your property and Kennedy's got to pay you a share. Make you a rich young filly, besides a purty one."

Trenna sank down on the edge of the trough and fanned herself weakly with her hand. She and Dulcie had fretted so much about money. She wondered absently what they'd find to fret about now. Then she remembered, and jumped up.

But old Bill was talking again. "That miner hombre jumped a foot when I mentioned he was on your land. He knowed it already, and after I bristled up at him he admitted he'd been paying blackmail to somebody down here to keep still about his find. Somebody that had told him us ranchers was plumb mean and shot miners on sight. He was scared to tell me who it was told him that, but I'll give you one guess. Clem Mockton. No wonder he hankered to marry Dulcie, till I taken a dislike to the way he slicked his hair back and run him off. He—"

Trenna jumped up and down. None of this stuff mattered now. Pete was in danger. She screamed, "You old goat, stop that yapping a minute and listen to me! Something awful's happened to Pete, and you've got to help—"

TRENNA heard the cheery whistle then. She jumped around and stared, gaping, toward the roof of the hotel porch.

Pete was up there. He grinned and waved at her as he swung a long leg over a windowsill and eased out onto the roof. He had some papers in his hand.

"Hi, Trenna sweetheart," he called. "I'm coming right down there and kiss you."

Trenna's heart jumped. But then she heard Vinegar Bill's deep growl and at the same instant she saw a furtive figure thrust an arm out through another of the hotel's open windows, getting ready to give Pete a shove.

She screamed. Old Bill shouted. Pete whipped around, grabbed hold of that arm and jerked.

The man at the window teetered a while on the sill, then lost his balance and toppled into full view. Tearing one of the curtains loose, he sprawled on the roof. It was Clem Mockton.

Pete moved in on him, slipping and sliding on the roof. Pete didn't fall off, though. He'd had practice at this sort of thing in the Walking W house.

He said, "You got back a little late, Mister. While you was waiting for me at that trap you set up, I doubled back and got into your room here and found them careful records you kept. Took that miner for plenty, didn't you. Reckon he told you I was up there, so you knowed I was wise."

Mockton kicked and rolled himself over. Pete made a grab for him, but was too late. Mockton rolled from the porch and landed on his feet, springy-like, and started running.

He'd gone only a few feet when the rope that old Vinegar Bill had grabbed from a horse dropped over Mockton's head and jerked him flat.

Pete dropped to the ground, but he wasn't needed. The fat sheriff sailed past Trenna, wheezing, and helped Vinegar Bill with the prisoner. Pete stalked over to Trenna.

He smiled down at her. "I stopped by that miner's camp when I first prowled into them mountains. Suspected what was going on, and come around to this side to see how things looked here. Then I started seeing purty gals."

"So you didn't really come down that canyon," Trenna said faintly. "Then that day you really sneaked past me while I was, uh, splashing."

"Nope. I'd gone there a long time before and left my horse while I tried to find a way to climb up the canyon. Heard you, uh, splashing though. Being a gentleman, I whistled."

Trenna laughed. "I don't know whether to believe you or not. You tell such awful tall ones!"

"Yup. Tell you what, though. You can always know when I go to telling one. My left ear twitches."

She looked up at his left ear. It wasn't twitching now. He was grinning at her in a way that made her lips quiver impatiently. He grabbed her.

"Hey," she objected, "aren't you getting mixed up? Dulcie's the one that—"

"Nope. Dulcie'll do all right. I explained to her last night that you're the one old Pete loves."

She looked anxiously at his left ear and saw that it was motionless. She tingled all over. He was going to kiss her now, and she slipped her arms about his tanned neck to give him cooperation that would make both his ears wiggle.

MOVIE NEWS COMING UP IN THE NEXT ISSUE

•

A Review of Paramount's

DENVER and RIO GRANDE

featuring

EDMOND O'BRIEN and STERLING HAYDEN

PLUS

A WORD-AND-PICTURE PERSONALITY SKETCH OF

ANNE BAXTER

RANCH FLICKER TALK

"I—I never dreamed—" moaned Belle

For the Love of Mr. Smith

By Beverly Darrell

WHEN CORA blew out the twenty-four candles on the cake, her face flushed as she caught her sister Belle's eager look of sympathy. "You can bet I won't be home on the ranch when I'm that age," Belle said.

Belle patted her brown curls with one small, white hand, smoothed her lavender silk over a nineteen-inch waist with the other, and gave a disdainful sniff at the cake, as if to say such food was only for heifers like Cora.

She's like a banty hen, always clucking and preening and showing off, thought Cora. I could wring her neck.

Ignoring Belle completely, she edged her long legs under the round kitchen table, kicked off her man-sized shoes and, savoring each mouthful of her own chocolate layer, she day-dreamed of Mr. Smith, that

EVERY TIME poor Cora almost hooked a man, her lovely sister arrived on the scene

nice Mr. Sterno Smith who had been working on the Diggins's ranch since last month.

She knew he was nice because when he came over to borrow, he tipped his broad-brimmed hat and said, "Howdy." Afterwards, with a mumbled "thanks," the lean six feet of him faded away.

There was something about him. Maybe it was the way he pulled his hat low over his eyes, or the way he spoke crisply through clenched teeth, or the way he turned his head in a hurry if you attempted to see his face. The thought of his being so shy made Cora feel bold.

The sweetness of lilacs brought her back to reality. She could escape Belle, but not that heavy-scented perfume she covered herself with.

"Cora had a beau once," said Ma, taking small, precise bites.

Cora pushed back her chair abruptly. The memory of Mr. Dobbs was too painful. Short, stout Mr. Dobbs had come calling on Sundays and brought her flowers. Until he spied Belle. Then, he came calling on Sundays and brought Belle flowers, until Belle met Willie Gadson. Mr. Dobbs never came back.

That's the way it always was. No man stepped onto their red-flowered carpet without succumbing to those heavily lashed blue eyes and the lingering odor of lilacs.

"That new fella over at Diggins's is kind of cute." Belle eyed her sister slyly.

Cora almost dropped the plate she was holding. She pushed back a wisp of her flyaway hair with a big, capable hand and stared at Belle for an instant with eyes that were a dead giveaway. She placed the dish carefully on the kitchen sink and with a measured tread she went out the back door to the hen house. She was followed all the way by her sister's tinkling laugh.

So Belle had guessed about Mr. Smith. She said he was cute. But to Cora he was the sun, the moon and the stars. The more eggs she gathered the more determined she became not to lose him.

"Why don't we have that new fella over at Diggins's to supper," she suggested at the table that night after Belle was safely upstairs primping for Willie Gadson.

"What for? He don't say more'n two words. Can't argue with nobody that won't say more'n two words," said Pa, helping himself to more peach conserve.

"Cora! You don't mean?" A hopeful tear appeared in Ma's brown eyes.

"Oh, Ma, for heaven's sake!" Ma was always so anxious for her it was embarrassing. "I don't mean anything. The poor fella's lonesome, that's all, and skinny. Do him good to eat some extra."

SHE INVITED him to come on a summer evening when Belle was having supper in town. The heady odor of honeysuckle wafted through the open windows and mingled with the spicy fragrance of ham, baked with cloves, which pervaded the house.

The biscuits stood hot and fluffy in the warming oven when Cora sprinted upstairs for her new green shirtwaist. Then, into Belle's room for the curling iron and a squirt from the atomizer of lilac perfume. She took the stairs two at a time down to the kitchen and had transformed her wispy hair into soft waves when his knock came.

Her hand trembled and she nearly dropped the curling iron in her excitement to be ready and composed and beautiful. She heard Pa let him in the parlor. Now was the time for her to mince in and greet her beau.

She strode into the other room, stared into Mr. Smith's bashful eyes and shook his hand.

The young man appeared uncomfortable in his blue serge suit. Little beads of sweat stood out on his forehead, but he managed to gulp out of the thin slice of his mouth, "Howdy."

He was loosening up by the time they ate their way to the apple pie floating in heavy cream. It seemed as if he had been working as a hired hand for well on to fifteen years. Been saving his money too. "For the day comes when a fella wants to settle down and get his own ranch."

Here, Ma scrutinized Mr. Smith with a shrewd eye, while Cora attempted to control the eagerness she felt. Sterno Smith continued in a hissing monotone and without

a smile, only his remarkable black eyes smiled at Cora as they darted from her to Ma, to Pa and then back again to her.

Her cheeks were very pink and she buried her roughened hands in the folds of her skirt. And already she was with Sterno Smith on their own little ranch, and Ma and Pa and Belle were coming to visit, and she was showing off to Belle....

While Ma and Cora did dishes, Pa and Sterno sat in the parlor and smoked their pipes. "He likes you Cora," whispered Ma. "Likes your cooking too," she added as an afterthought.

When she re-entered the parlor, Cora noted that she would have to speak to Mr. Smith about that pipe. The tobacco he smoked smelled to high heaven. But she had to admit he was still very desirable as a husband.

A HALF HOUR later, when a welcome breeze billowed the curtains gently into the room, they heard a buggy rattle to a stop, and the pawing of a horse's hoof on the hard baked ground.

"Oh, don't come in," Belle's light voice trilled. "It's rather late. Yes, after ten." There was a silence. "Oh, you know the answer to that." Here there was a giggle. "G-night."

Belle danced into the parlor with a gust of warm air. Her color was high and delicate. In the flicker of the lamplight, she was like a lovely china doll.

"Didn't know everybody was up, and company here too! Oh, it's Mr. Smith. How are you sir?" And she tilted her head to look up at him and flutter her long lashes.

Sterno kept from beaming by pulling in the corners of his mouth, but he scarcely took his eyes off Belle for the next twenty minutes. Then he rose to go.

"When may I call again?" he asked, turning to her with a pleading look like a roped calf.

"Why, any time it's convenient, Mr. Smith: Any time at all," and Belle drifted upstairs trailing an aroma of lilacs.

Ma watched Cora with dismay, but Cora smiled and nodded at Mr. Smith and even shook his hand once more as she endeavored to gaze soulfully into his eyes when she whispered, "Good night."

Then she followed her sister upstairs. The sound of her feet was deliberate and unhurried. Without knocking, she opened the door to Belle's room and stood in the doorway.

Belle was brushing her long chestnut curls in front of a wall mirror, and she stopped with brush in midair Cora seldom came to her room and it startled her to see, in the mirror, six feet of determined womanhood blocking the only exit. Without any preliminaries, Cora said, "Belle, you stay away from Sterno Smith."

"What—you don't mean—" Belle's surprised laugh rang out, and she turned and lowered the hairbrush.

"I mean to marry him and you leave him alone." Cora was vehement.

Belle bristled. "Well, marry him if you can get him. I think he's shady," she added spitefully, and returned once more to her brushing.

"Shady?" Cora's shocked eyes widened in alarm.

"Why, of course. Look at him. His eyes are shifty and he talks through his teeth. A typical criminal. Probably hiding out on the Diggins's ranch."

Cora gasped, and Belle regarded her sister's face in the mirror with an expression of triumph....

The rest of the week Cora tossed and twisted and had nightmares. She had just about settled on Mr. Smith as a husband and it was difficult to picture him as a criminal. But, he did have a suspicious way about him, and she wasn't sure.

She toyed with the idea of becoming the wife of a hunted man, but discarded it. The law would be bound to catch up with them, and she would have no husband, anyway. No, better to let well enough alone. Better to let him go out of her life forever.

By the time she and Belle were ready to go to town Saturday morning after the mail, she wished she had never laid eyes on Mr. Smith. More so, since Belle acted like the cat that ate the canary, and made sly little digs about how "you never can tell about anybody nowadays."

THE HEAT was already spiraling up from the sun-baked earth into bumpy little waves when Cora drove old Nelly into town at full speed. She knew this would make her sister breathless and red-eyed from the clouds of dust that rose and engulfed them.

They drove up in front of the General Store and Cora had hitched the horse and was inside, before Belle repaired the damage.

In the rear of the store was a window which opened on a back room, and above this window was the printed sign, *Post Office*. Cora tramped over and collected five letters. She was thumbing through them when Belle approached, and Cora handed her sister a letter from that freckle-faced boy who had visited the Wilsons at Christmas.

There was nothing for her, so she went to the store counter to view the new calico and to buy a spool of thread. When she turned away with her purchase, she looked down into the frightened face of her sister.

"Cora!" Belle was breathless, and her hand was at her throat. "Come and see this."

She led her sister to a picture which was tacked up on the wall near the post office window. A man's face glared down at them. He wore a broad-brimmed hat tilted low over one eye and his lips slanted narrowly into a sardonic smile. Bold letters stated:

> Dangerous bank robber wanted. This is the only picture we have of this man, for he has never been captured.

"I—I never dreamed—" moaned Belle, twisting her handkerchief.

Cora was startled at the resemblance, but her voice was calm. "What foolishness!"

"I suppose all the men we know go around with their hats pulled over their eyes and talk out of the corners of their mouths."

"I don't believe it," Cora said flatly. "No matter how suspicious he acts, Mr. Smith is no bank robber." But an icy little shiver went down her spine.

The next day, Sunday, was a scorcher After church and dinner were over the entire family gathered on the front porch. Pa sheltered his face from the flies with a newspaper, braced his feet against the porch railing, and dozed off. Ma sat and worked on her embroidery and fanned herself now and then. Belle dabbed her brow and wadded her handkerchief into small knots, and paced impatiently up and down.

She's waiting for Willie Gadson to call, thought Cora. Soon she'll marry and be showing off to me.

She rocked forward in Ma's ancient rocker and gave the porch railing a vicious kick.

JUST AT this moment they heard the sound of a horse's hoofs spattering on dry earth and the wheels of a buggy turning at a smart clip. Cora pushed herself farther down into the old rocker. Willie Gadson was such a bore.

"Cora," came a frantic whisper. "It's—it's Mr. Smith."

She glanced up in time to see Sterno Smith bring a beautiful little black mare to a halt right in front of the steps. She watched, fascinated, as he leaped lightly from the buggy to the ground, swept his hat from his head and flung at them one word, "Howdy."

"Why, it's Mr. Smith," said Ma, fanning herself and turning to Cora with an I-told-you-so expression. "Come up and sit awhile Mr. Smith. Somebody go get Mr. Smith a chair."

Belle pressed her handkerchief tightly against her mouth and, with panic in her eyes, hurried into the house for one.

"Came over to say good-by to you folks," Sterno gritted through tight lips as he came up the stairs.

"Where you going, son?" The newspaper fell to the floor and Pa emerged almost wide awake.

The younger man's eyes narrowed as he took the chair Belle brought. "Over to Dawson City for a spell. Got some business there."

They've got a bank over there too, thought Cora, picturing Mr. Smith with a

black silk handkerchief tied over his mouth.

"Hope to be back in a couple of weeks." His enticing black eyes smiled at Cora and he cast a swift glance at Belle who was leaning against the railing. She was very pale and was clasping and unclasping her hands and peering down the road.

Then Cora couldn't help asking it. "What kind of business could it be that would take a man clear over to Dawson City?"

"Going over after some money," the answer was spit back at them. "They got a bank over there and—"

The rest of his sentence was punctured by the beat of horses' hoofs. Two men, riding hard, hove into view, and when they drew up in front of the porch, Sterno Smith was on his feet with his right hand thrust deeply into his right front pocket.

"Hello, Sheriff," Pa said to the short, balding man who sat astride the roan fingering his hat with one hand and mopping the sweat off his face with the other. "Come to pay us a visit?"

"Wa-al, in a way," the sheriff drawled. "We're looking for a Mr. Smith. Diggins said we'd find him here. You him?" he barked at Sterno.

At this juncture, Belle clung to the railing for support, and Cora wondered where to hide when the shooting started. But nothing happened.

"I'm the man you're looking for," said Sterno, and he walked down the steps and extended his hand. "What you trailing me for?"

"Well, it's kind of silly." The sheriff pulled a sheet of lilac-scented notepaper out of his shirt pocket and handed it to the young man. "I found this in my hymn book at church this morning. Somebody hereabouts seems to think you're a bank robber, but the man we're looking for is close to sixty." He chuckled "That picture in the post office is twenty years old."

"Somebody's trying to cause you trouble," said the other man. "Diggins said we ought to warn you on account of you was leaving for Dawson City."

Sterno read the note. "I'll take care of this bird when I get back." His voice was grim and his hands were clenched fists.

Cora saw that Belle was the color of chalk.

"But Dawson City can't wait, Sheriff. Been saving fifteen years to get me some land. Going over to the bank for the money."

"Sounds like you mean to settle down, boy." The sheriff nudged his deputy and directed an admiring glance toward Belle.

CORA'S face froze into a smile when the two men rode away. It wouldn't do to ever show how she felt, not even by the flicker of an eyelash.

"And now Miss Cora, would you like to drive along the river?" The words were barely audible.

He helped her into the buggy and she saw her sister's mouth drop open in astonishment and envy as they drove away.

Down by the river she managed to say, "I—I thought you came to see Belle."

"It would cost a pretty penny to keep that bit of fluff in perfume," he shot out dryly.

Gathering courage, she asked, "Mr. Smith, I—I mean Sterno. Why do you talk like that?"

"Like what?" He looked trapped and would not meet her eyes, and his face got red.

"Well, with your mouth closed." Her voice was kind.

"You really want to know?" He was very red now.

She nodded, and then he smiled. Smiled broadly, revealing upper teeth which protruded inches over his lower ones. Quickly he clamped his lips together again. He glanced hastily at Cora, but her expression hadn't changed.

So that's how I got him, she thought. But if he keeps his mouth shut, nobody need ever know.

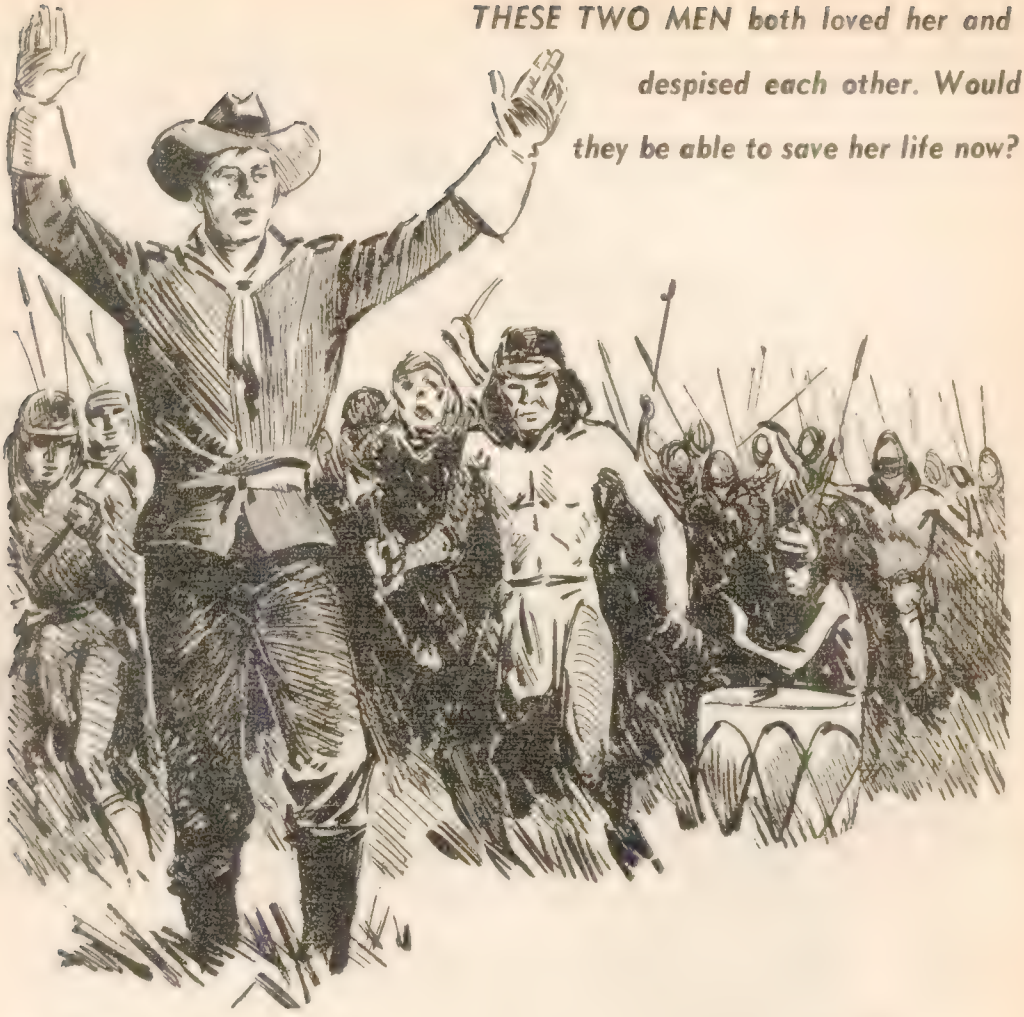
She flicked a bit of dust off of his blue serge suit. And she could see herself and Sterno Smith on their own little ranch and Ma and Pa and Belle were coming to visit, and she was showing off to Belle . . . .

Bret's tall form advanced slowly into the firelight

CAVALRY BRIDE

by Hanlon Carroll

THESE TWO MEN both loved her and despised each other. Would they be able to save her life now?



THEY MUST be nearly there, thought Debbie Baxter, her heart quickening with eagerness. The desolate shoreline with its drooping green mesquite and gray arrow weed, pungent under the scorching sun of the September afternoon, was crawling by more slowly now.

The *Saguaro Queen's* stern wheel, churning the roiling river to red foam, had reduced its hissing roar to a wheezing clatter, and Debbie could hear the mestizo deckhands bringing her trunk from the hold. Could hear the river captain bellowing, "Careful of that trunk. It's got weddin' foofaraw in it!"

And suddenly, with a matter of minutes between her and Steve's waiting arms, with the long journey so nearly ended, Debbie knew panic. Because now that she was face to face with it, the small worry that had nagged at her mind ever since she got Steve's last letter, loomed suddenly large and frightening.

Abruptly, Debbie put down the toilet articles she had been packing and knelt by her open carpetbag, trouble darkening her thick-fringed hazel eyes. A slender girl, with the untanned skin of the Easterner, she was chestnut-haired, with a tip-tilted nose and a willful little chin. She was not quite twenty, but her lips, half parted as she rummaged in the bag, were womanly soft,

with a sweetness about them that could make a man think of a wild rose, or a kiss.

Then her searching hands found the letter she sought, and she read it again as she had read it a hundred times on the long voyage around the Horn, on the coastwise schooner from San Francisco to the Gulf of California where she had boarded this huffing, clattering little Colorado River boat.

"You will find one old friend in this wilderness," Steve had written in his thin, precise hand, "Our post surgeon, Captain Bret Holden, tells me he knew you as a very capable nurse in the recently ended conflict between the States."

How clearly those carefully penned words evoked the memory of Bret and that night a year and a half ago when she had last seen him!

Bret, his dark eyes filled with hurt, standing tall and angry in the moonlight before her on the deck of the little Sanitary Commission hospital ship on the Potomac where she had been a nurse and he had been the young cavalry surgeon in charge. Bret, trying to mend their misunderstanding with a blunt Western directness from which she had withdrawn with the inborn reserve of the Easterner. Bret, flinging his share of the bitter words of that last quarrel that had ended their brief engagement.

And now, of all the cavalry posts in Arizona Territory, Bret had had to show up at Fort Weston where she was coming to marry Steve!

She had told Steve she'd been engaged before, but that was all. Had he guessed that Bret was the man? Had he tucked some veiled sarcasm into those words "old friend"? Because Steve, gay and gallant though he was, could be jealous—Steve, who was usually so charming, who was so strikingly handsome with his light blue eyes, his clipped brown beard, the touch of gray at his temples.

Major Stephen Conover of Sheridan's Cavalry, she thought proudly, with a glow of romance about him that had opened the doors of the most exclusive drawing rooms and made him the most sought-after bachelor in Washington where she had met him. How wonderful he was! Then, even his jealousy had made her feel precious and wanted. But now—

What will I do if he's found out that it's Bret I was engaged to, she thought despairingly. I know he'll never believe it's all over.

"We're tying up now, Miss Deborah," the river captain's voice warned from her open cabin door.

Debbie looked up distractedly. "Oh, thank you." She thrust Steve's letter back in the bag. No more time to worry about it now. Maybe her fears were groundless. Maybe he hadn't found out.

Hastily, she finished packing and brushed at her skirts. She saw with dismay how the blue-sprigged dimity she'd put on fresh that morning drooped over her heat-wilted crinoline petticoats. But there was nothing to be done about it now.

She tugged on her bonnet, tying the blue ribbons with impatient fingers, her hazel eyes shining with the excitement she always felt at the thought of seeing Steve. Any minute now he'd be coming aboard. Into this very cabin. Holding her in strong arms.

A SHADOW cut off the light from the door and someone said, "Major Conover's apologies, ma'am, that scouting duty prevented his meeting you. I'm to drive you to the fort."

Debbie knew a moment of sharp disappointment. Then the small mirror before her reflected a familiar, curly, dark head above broad, blue-clad shoulders, and she knew who stood in the door. She realized she had known the instant she heard the deep voice with the note of teasing laughter in it.

"Bret," she whispered, turning with a suddenly pounding heart. "Bret Holden."

He stood just inside the door, arms folded, the corners of his dark eyes crinkled in a grin, his left eyebrow raised quizzically in the way she remembered so well.

"So," he said, "you finally came out to that horrible, lonely desert country you swore you'd never live in!"

Quickly, the welcome died in her eyes, angry color flooding her cheeks.

"My opinion of the West hasn't changed one bit," she retorted. "Just because you fell in love with Arizona when you were stationed here before the war you think everyone else ought to feel the same way. But we're not staying. Steve hates being sent out here as much as I do. He's requesting a transfer as soon as possible."

She wondered if Bret knew of the Washington desk job Steve had expected to fill. The job that had vanished with the shake-up of military departments following Ap-

BLOODY LANCE

pomattox when Steve had been transferred to the Western command of General John S. Mason.

"Well, you had that big city fun and excitement you said you wanted—at least for a while." Bret grinned, moving his long body aside as the mestizos came for her bags.

"Oh, yes." He nodded as her hazel eyes widened with an unspoken question. "I had the whole romantic story from your landlady in Washington. You see, I looked you up after our squabble. I thought maybe—well, never mind what I thought. Your landlady told me how you nursed the dashing major back to health after his attack of fever. How he showered you with attentions and took you to all the brilliant social functions—"

"Bret, don't be bitter," she interrupted. "Don't spoil my happiness."

He looked at her a long moment, his dark eyes sober. "If you're happy, Deb," he said, "then I guess that's all that matters."

HE WAS silent, leading her down the gangplank, but by the time they had crossed the dusty gray road to where several rigs stood in the shade of some dilapidated adobe buildings, he had regained his usual cheerfulness.

"Sorry I can't offer you a carriage, milady," he joked, helping her up to the seat of the mule-drawn army ambulance in which the deckhands were loading her baggage. "Outside of cavalry mounts, this is the army's favorite means of transportation out here."

"If that was the worst feature of this country, I wouldn't mind," she murmured, her gaze sweeping distastefully across the mesquite-grown flats to the gray sage beyond that went on and on until it met the rocky gray-brown hills shimmering in the hot distance.

"I don't blame Steve for hating such a desolate command." She shuddered. She looked quickly at Bret as he swung up beside her and took the reins. "Something terribly important must have come up to keep him from meeting me today?"

Bret shouted at the mules, guiding the jolting ambulance into the well-worn ruts of the road before he replied.

"Nothing unusual," he said shortly. "The Indians aren't used to reservation life yet, and the major has his hands full riding herd on them."

"Well, I'm not surprised!" she exclaimed. "Steve wrote me that this harebrained scheme of General Mason's to put all Indians on reservations would never work."

A whiplash of something more than annoyance flicked briefly in Bret's eyes.

"A lot of us would like to see these first reservations work," he said. "They could solve the Indian problem for good if they're

handled right. Mason has put it squarely up to the Indians—come and live on a reservation and be fed at government expense, or stick to the warpath and be wiped out by the cavalry."

"Steve says they should all be wiped out," retorted Debbie. "Especially the Apaches."

"I'm afraid the major's opinion of Apaches came from Eastern newspaper accounts rather than from actual experience." Bret's voice held anger on a brittle leash.

"Most of our Indians at the reservation are Mojaves or Cocopahs," he went on. "Our only Apaches are a quiet northern tribe from up Prescott way that's been at peace since '63. And the government has got all our Indians digging an irrigation canal that will take water from the Colorado. So far, that's kept them too busy to give the major any trouble he could complain about."

Resentment flared quickly in Debbie. "You don't think much of Steve, do you?" she snapped.

Bret grinned then, the taut planes of his face relaxing. "Sorry, Deb," he said, "It's just that the major and I don't agree on how to handle the Indians."

Debbie looked at him, her anger cooling as she appraised the lean bronze of his cheeks, the deep cleft in his chin. He was handsomer than she'd remembered, she thought reluctantly. Surely Steve would never have sent a man like this to meet her if he'd looked on him as a rival. And then, before she could stop it, the question that had plagued her all the way West was tumbling from her lips.

"Bret, does Steve know about—us?"

For a moment he stared straight ahead in silence, then he said, "He knows you were one of my surgical nurses during the war."

That should have satisfied her. She should have let the matter drop there, she realized later. Instead, she leaned toward him, her face rosy with more than the desert heat as she persisted. "No. I mean, does he know that we—that—"

Bret turned suddenly and caught her arms in a fierce, hurting grip. "That I love you?" he whispered. "That I've always loved you? No, he doesn't know. But I've made up my mind to tell him."

Then he kissed her.

FOR A STARTLED moment Debbie pushed frantically at his broad shoulders, her heart beating wildly against his, then one arm came free and she brought her hand up to his cheek in a resounding slap.

"Bret, you had no right," she gasped. It angered her to find she was trembling, remembering things she wanted to forget.

Bret grinned, massaging the slapped cheek. "I probably deserved that," he said ruefully, "but it was worth it."

"I shouldn't have to remind you I came out here to marry Steve Conover," she blazed.

"Did you?" he asked, his dark eyes frankly searching hers. "After the way you kissed me just now, I'd like to think you came because you found out that nothing can keep us apart for long. And you knew I was here. The major told me he'd written you the news."

"Bret, of all the conceit!" she interrupted. "It doesn't seem to have occurred to you that I love Steve enough to follow him anywhere, even out here."

That blow struck deep. She saw Bret whiten under his tan, but he caught her hands and held them.

"I'll never believe that you really love him," he said in a low voice. "Like a lot of people, your sense of values was confused by the war, but you're my girl, Debbie, and you always will be."

Debbie slid determinedly to the far side of the seat and, recapturing her hands, folded them primly in her lap.

"Bret, I don't want to discuss it any further," she said icily. "And I'll thank you to respect my engagement to your commanding officer."

Bret grinned and touched his hat in mock salute.

"Yes, ma'am," he replied in the old teasing voice. "If that's the way you want it, that's the way it will be. But you haven't married him yet."

He slapped the reins smartly across the mules' rumps, and as the ambulance rumbled forward again, he broke into a maddeningly cheerful whistle.

IT WAS late afternoon when they arrived at the fort. The low-slanting sun that cast purple shadows on the distant mesas was painting the buildings with soft rose, but even so, the romanticist in Debbie was disappointed. Fort Weston was nothing, she saw, but neat, montonous rows of ugly, whitewashed adobe buildings set on a high red bluff above the muddy river.

Bret, still cheerfully, scrupulously polite, pulled up with a flourish before one of the identical white houses.

"Here we are," he said. "You'll be quartered with the major's adjutant, Lieutenant Huston, and his wife until after the wedding."

Sylvia Huston was some years Debbie's senior, but Debbie liked her immediately. A tall, plain young woman with snapping black eyes, Sylvia opened the door and without waiting for Bret's introduction, she came forward with outstretched hand.

"Welcome to the Society of Lonely Officer's Wives," she said gaily. "Outside of Suds Row, we are the only five white women in hundreds of miles of Indian territory."

Then, almost in the same breath, she added, "I hope you ride?" And at Debbie's nod of assent. "Good. I've a side-saddle down at the stables you're welcome to until you can order one from San Francisco. Everything we have comes from there by boat, you know."

After Bret left, Sylvia still chattered incessantly while she brought bowl and pitcher and clean towels for Debbie to freshen up.

But at last Debbie was able to ask, "And how is my fiancé?"

Sylvia's hesitation was only momentary, but Debbie noticed it.

"Quite well, I believe," Sylvia said carefully. Then with her quick smile, she added, "And he will be better than ever now that you're here."

There's something wrong, Debbie thought uneasily. There's something she isn't telling me. But she pushed the thought aside as ridiculous. If anything had been wrong she would have detected it in Steve's letters.

And then Debbie heard the drumming of hoofs on the road and Sylvia cried, "Here come our boys."

Eagerly, Debbie followed her hostess outside to the latticed piazza facing the parade ground, her heart dancing in excited anticipation of her first glimpse of Steve.

And there he was, riding in at the head of his troop. But after one look, Debbie knew that something *was* wrong.

The change in his appearance shocked her. It wasn't just the sweat-stained campaign hat, or the white alkali dust that powdered his usually impeccable blue uniform and shining black boots. It was the thinness of his face and the way he slumped in the saddle that frightened her. Then he saw her and straightened, touching his hat in salute at her waved greeting.

Clasping her hands tightly to keep from shaking, Debbie watched as the troop came to attention before the flagpole with its little cannon that was fired as the colors fluttered down. Then, almost as soon as the bugles sounded the last note of *Retreat*, Steve had leaped from his horse and was hurrying toward her to take her in his arms with a sound almost like a sob.

"Oh Debbie, Debbie," he murmured, his beard rough against her cheek. "It's been such a long, lonely time waiting for you to come."

"Too long, Steve," she whispered, hoping that he wouldn't see how shaken she was by the change in his appearance.

HE HELD her at arm's length, looking at her hungrily. "You're really here," he said, his voice shaking a little. Then he smiled. "I hope you'll forgive my not meeting you, but the way things have been going out here it was impossible. And since you know Dr. Holden, I thought you'd feel less strange than if I sent my orderly."

It seemed to Debbie that Steve was watching her for the effect of his words, and she fought to keep from her cheeks the guilty color that rose to betray her memory of Bret's kiss.

But apparently Steve saw nothing that disturbed him. And then he was leading her off to see the quarters that would be theirs. Telling her about household arrangements. Stopping a burly, red-faced trooper to present him as O'Brien, his striker, who would do the heavy work for her.

"And tonight," Steve chatted on, "there will be a little party in your honor. I'd like to call it a ball—" he laughed shortly—"only there won't be enough of us. But you shall wear your prettiest gown and we'll show them what a handsome couple the major and his lady can be even in this wilderness."

"Steve, that will be wonderful!"

For the first time, Debbie's hazel eyes lighted with pleasure. Suddenly the prospect of life at this lonely outpost didn't look so dull after all. Perhaps, as Steve's wife, she could see to it that even tiny Fort Weston had a decent amount of social activity.

Then, in the dusky shadow of one of the houses, Steve pulled her into his arms. "You haven't asked me," he whispered, "but surely you've been wondering when we'll be married?"

Debbie nodded, turning a flushed cheek to his rough kiss.

Steve's arms tightened possessively around her. "I wish I could say tonight," he murmured huskily, "but it will probably be more like tomorrow or next day, as soon as the chaplain arrives from Tucson."

He released her reluctantly, his voice going harsh as he said, "You must realize, Debbie, that this post is a sort of army stepchild. We're not big enough to have our own chaplain, and we may even lose our surgeon. Dr. Holden expects to be ordered to another post any day."

Steve had paused before the last house in the row, and Debbie was glad he couldn't see her face as he turned to open the door.

So Bret was leaving! And why should that make any difference to me, she thought angrily. Bret means nothing to me any more, nothing at all.

"Well, Debbie?"

She was aware that Steve was inside. That he had lighted a lamp and was waiting for her. Hastily, she stepped over the threshold. Then she brought her hands together in a little gesture of delight.

"Oh Steve," she breathed. She hadn't expected anything like this. After Sylvia's drab rooms, sparsely furnished with shabby odds and ends, these thick carpets, these richly toned draperies and fine-grained woods were like something out of a dream.

"You like it?" Steve's eyes were on her, waiting her reaction.

"It's beautiful," cried Debbie, sinking into a red plush chair. "But—" she was thinking of what the freight bill must have done to his salary—"Steve, I hope you didn't go into debt for it?"

The bitter lines were etched into his thin fase again. "Supposing I did," he said, his tone defiant. "It was the best they had in San Francisco."

His handsome head went up proudly. "We are used to finer things, to gracious living in my family. And I'll not ask my bride to get along with the bare necessities most army wives put up with out here!"

Deeply touched, Debbie looked up at him, wanting to thank him. But deep inside her a small fear began to grow. Will he always be like this, she thought. He can't afford these things. Won't he ever be able to face hardships realistically?

THEN STEVE was kneeling before her, gripping her hands. "Oh Debbie," he cried, "this isn't the kind of life I expected to offer you. This frightful desert, the heat, the Indians!"

The last word was a harsh whisper as Steve got to his feet and went to stand by the window.

Instantly Debbie was beside him, her hand resting anxiously on his arm. "Steve dear, I know something is terribly wrong. I knew it the moment I saw you. Can't you tell me about it?"

"No," he said shortly. "I mean, there's nothing wrong. It's just that I've had a touch of fever again lately—"

He turned and she saw the whiteness of his face, the beads of perspiration on his forehead. He did look ill.

"Come along," he said hastily, taking her

Debbie fought them desperately, but it was useless

hand and giving her a poor imitation of his old smile. "I want to give you your wedding present. Two of them, in fact."

Debbie was quite overwhelmed by the first gift. It was a lovely pair of old silver candelabra that had belonged to Steve's mother.

Then Steve was unlocking a little drawer in the rosewood table and when he turned back to her she saw that a deadly-looking little gun with a short, ugly barrel lay in his palm. Trying to joke, he explained how it worked, but his hand shook as he gave it to her.

"Always carry it with you when you ride, Debbie," he instructed. "And if you ever should be taken by Indians, remember—the last shot is for yourself!"

Debbie stared at the little gun, then took it in fingers that were suddenly cold as she looked into Steve's eyes. What she saw there disturbed her far more than the worry that had haunted her journey West. Because, depsite his denials, something was very wrong with Steve. Something had made him desperately afraid and unsure of himself, and seeing it, Debbie was frightened too.

She dressed for the party that night with none of her usual pride in the pink silk's twelve yard skirt that stood out so crisply over her starched petticoats, and her hands shook a little as she hooked up the tiny-waisted bodice. A gun for a wedding present, she thought. Had any bride ever received a stranger gift?

She shuddered, thinking again of Steve's words: "The last shot is for yourself." Was the Indian danger so great after all? Then why had Bret minimized it on their ride to the fort? And if there was no Indian danger, what was Steve afraid of? There was something sinister about the whole situation, and Debbie didn't like it.

The thing to do, she thought, is corner Bret this evening and make him tell me the truth.

BUT THE evening was half over before she had a chance to speak to him. In the long barracks building that had been cleared and decorated with grouped guidons and flags and hung with bright streamers of colored paper, Debbie led off the first reel with Steve. After that she was kept busy dancing to the gay tunes of three troopers with violin, guitar and accordion—all the bachelor officers in the room saw to that. All, that is, except Bret.

Finally the little orchestra broke softly into a waltz and Bret, handsomer than she had ever seen him, in dress uniform, was crossing the room to where she sat with Steve.

"I'd begun to think you'd forgotten I was here," chided Debbie as Bret guided her smoothly about the floor.

"You asked me to respect your engagement to the major, didn't you?" he teased. His arm tightened around her waist and his dark head bent down to her tenderly.

"Debbie, honey, how can you expect me to be this close to you and not tell you I love you?" he murmured.

"Bret, stop it!" she whispered, the warm color rushing to her face. "Steve looks like he's coming out to cut in any minute and there was something I wanted to ask you."

"Well?" he said.

"Bret, I'm worried about Steve. He's so jumpy and nervous."

Then she told him about the little gun. "What's happened to him?" she demanded. "What makes him act this way?"

"Nothing you need worry about," he evaded.

"Bret, stop trying to keep things from me," she cried. "I don't care what you told me this afternoon. I think Steve is expecting serious trouble with the Indians. That's it, isn't it?"

Bret was silent. Then he spoke. "Why don't you ask the major about it?" he suggested, releasing her gently, and Debbie turned to find Steve standing at her elbow. The hostility in his face startled her more than his sudden presence.

"Oh—Steve," stammered Debbie, "I was just—asking the doctor about your Indians."

"I can imagine what our fine young doctor told you about them," snorted Steve. "You know he regards himself as the friend of the downtrodden savage."

Debbie wished that she hadn't mentioned the subject. "Well, I—I've been curious to see them, Steve. Perhaps you'll drive me out to the reservation some time."

"Certainly not," snapped Steve. "They're treacherous rascals and I don't want you poking about that pigsty of an Indian camp. It isn't safe."

"Oh, it's not as bad as all that, sir," protested Bret good-humoredly. "Indians are not animals. They're human beings who behave quite well when the white man treats them fairly."

Steve's face was suddenly livid with anger. "Are you suggesting, as certain other malicious liars have done, that I've treated the Indians unfairly?"

Debbie saw Bret's jawline tighten, but his tone was still courteous as he said, "Not at all, sir. I was merely saying that it is perfectly safe for Miss Debbie to visit the reservation."

Steve appeared unwilling to drop his belligerence. "You seem quite anxious for Debbie to see how our savages live," he said stiffly. "Perhaps you were planning to take her out there yourself?"

Anger exploded dangerously in Bret's dark eyes. "Perhaps I was," he said, his voice deep with challenge. "And perhaps, sir, I should tell you this—unless you've already guessed it. I loved Debbie and asked her to marry me during the war. She broke our engagement, but I've never stopped loving her. And you may take this any way you like—if I can win her back from you, I'm going to do it!"

Her cheeks flaming at Bret's words, Debbie heard the collective gasp of the other dancers who had stopped in an embarrassed circle about them. She saw Steve's hands ball into white-knuckled fists. She felt sure that another second would see him fling aside the rules of officer conduct and launch himself at Bret.

And then they all heard the commotion at the door and turned. Shirts torn, levis fire-blackened, two tall, gangling boys and a grizzled rancher were shoving roughly past the sentry.

"Try to keep me from seeing the major, will ye?" bellowed the old man as he burst through the door with a final shove. Then he strode furiously across the room and planted himself before Steve.

"I thought the army was supposed to protect us ranchers from the redskins?" he raged. His bloodshot eyes raked contemptuously over the dress uniforms and beribboned gowns of the dancers.

"So while the army has a party, a passel of your pampered reservation Injuns raid my spread and set fire to my outbuildings and run off some stock!"

"You're sure they were from the reservation?" interposed Bret quickly.

"Hell!" roared the rancher, "the leader was Bloody Lance. I seen him in the firelight."

Steve turned triumphantly on Bret. "We'll discuss our personal differences another time, Doctor," he said, "but I imagine this proves my earlier point—that no amount of kind treatment will ever make the Indians anything but marauding savages!"

Then he turned to Lieutenant Huston. "Bloody Lance and his raiders may hide out in the hills," he said. "Have the Indian scouts come to my office immediately. B Troop will leave at dawn. Rations for a week."

THE TROOP was several hours on its way the next morning when Debbie impatiently tossed aside the old copy of *Harper's Weekly* through which she had been leafing.

"What on earth do you do to keep from being bored to death out here?" she demanded of Sylvia who had paused by her chair, a stack of fresh linen over her arm.

Sylvia looked at her speculatively. "If you're still interested in seeing the reservation," she said, "Dr. Holden may be riding out there this morning. He spends most of the time he isn't needed at the fort doctoring the Indians. You'll probably find him at the stables."

Debbie's hazel eyes flowed briefly, then darkened as she stood up and went restlessly to the window. "I suppose I shouldn't go," she murmured. "Steve wouldn't like it."

Sylvia's lips thinned to a tight line for a moment. Then she said, "Maybe I shouldn't tell you this, Debbie, but I'm going to do it anyway. There wouldn't be one bit of harm in your riding out there with Dr. Holden. Now, why don't you drop that prim and proper Eastern attitude of yours and admit that maybe you'd like to go?"

"Because I—because it's not true," stammered Debbie, blushing.

"Fiddlesticks! Of course it is," snapped Sylvia. "And I'll tell you something else. When Dr. Holden declared himself so handsomely last night, there wasn't a woman in the room who didn't think you are marrying the wrong man."

"Really, Sylvia—" began Debbie, but Sylvia had turned on her heel and left.

And standing there, stunned and angered at her hostess's words, Debbie was forced to admit that part of what she had said was true. Even through her confusion and embarrassment last night, she had sensed that the sympathies of the little company were not with their commanding officer, but with Bret. Steve had been unbearably insulting, but Debbie had felt a tide of resentment against him that went deeper than the matter of the moment.

Now, again, the feeling swept over her that all was not well here at the fort. Something unpleasant seemed to lay just beneath the surface, something for which Steve was to blame. But she didn't want to believe that.

Worriedly, Debbie began to pace the shabby little parlor. It was plain that something beside jealousy was gnawing at Steve's soul. Something that made him behave unreasonably, that had driven him to pick a quarrel publicly with Bret.

It had been Steve's fault last night, she thought resentfully. He started it. And there was no sense in his refusing to let me see the reservation.

She thrust her little chin out stubbornly. "I think I will go out there with Bret!" she said half aloud, and hurried to her room. A few minutes later she emerged in wide-skirted green riding habit and boots, and started for the stables.

BRET HAD just finished saddling a big black as she strolled up. "Want some company on your ride?" she asked, trying to make her voice sound casual.

Bret looked at her, his left eyebrow slanting quizzically upward. "The major wouldn't like it," he warned. Then, grinning, he added, "But I would."

Self-consciously, Debbie toed a loose pebble with her boot.

"Bret, if you're going to make love to me again I won't go," she said.

He gave an exaggerated sigh. "That's a high price to pay for your company, my sweet, but I'll do it."

Then his face sobered. "I'm not sure I should let you go, at that," he said. "Some of the Indian kids had rashy throats the other day. It may be contagious."

"I'm not afraid. Take me along, Bret." She was frankly eager now. "Maybe I can help."

As they made their way between the scattered wickiups of the low-lying reservation land by the river, Debbie was aware, suddenly, that she was seeing a side of Bret that she hadn't known existed—a side which was clearly reflected in the attitude of the Indians.

It was in the eyes of the copper-torsoed braves in reservation-issue trousers who straightened from their labor on the big irrigation canal to raise a hand in greeting. It glowed in the leathery face of a white-haired grandmother wrinkling her jaws in a toothless grin when Bret spoke to her. It bubbled in the laughter of the swarms of brown-bodied children all clamoring to be first when he swabbed throats, in order to get the reward of peppermint candy that followed.

"Bret, these people worship you," she said in an awed voice. "I believe you could do anything with them."

"Hardly that." He laughed. "Their medicine man hates me for cutting in on his practice. But I have been able to help some of them. Take this young fellow for instance—"

Bret scooped up a solemn-faced, black-haired toddler who sat on the ground where his mother was rubbing salt into a deer-

skin. Debbie stroked the child's hair.

"His people are northern Apaches," Bret explained. "They've tried harder than most tribes to learn the white man's ways. When they heard the government was offering food to Indians who would live on the reservation, the whole tribe walked—across the desert, mind you—from Prescott to the Colorado. Lots of the old folks and kids died on the way. This one was almost dead when he got here. It took everything I knew to save him."

Bret put the child down gently, and bitterness touched his tone as he added, "I may not have done him any favor. Life is bound to give him some hard knocks. He's Bloody Lance's son. And right now, Bloody Lance is in plenty of trouble with our major for helping himself to that rancher's beef."

Debbie's eyes searched Bret's for a moment, then she said, "Bret, I know there is something back of all this that you haven't told me. What did Steve mean last night when he said that some people thought he had treated the Indian's unfairly?"

Bret's lips shut tight, and for a minute they walked in silence toward the cottonwood where they had tied the horses.

Finally he said, "I wish you had asked anybody but me about this. Because no matter what I say, it's going to sound like I'm slandering the major."

HE HELD her stirrup as she mounted. "The whole thing began several months ago when the government food supplies were late, just as they are late now. The Indians have learned to depend on that food. When it doesn't get here on time, there are empty stomachs and grumbles of discontent."

Debbie looked at him quickly. "I—I don't suppose Steve could have given them food from the storehouse at the fort?"

"There's nothing in the book of regulations that covers it," said Bret dryly. "But some officers would have done it anyway."

Then he went on. "The Indians are not supposed to leave the reservation without permission, even to hunt. But their families were hungry, so Bloody Lance and some of his braves left and went hunting. They left, it's true, without asking the major's permission. So the major took out after them. When he caught up with them, he threw them in the guardhouse."

Bret gave a wry little shrug. "It didn't make any difference why they had broken the rule about leaving the reservation. The rule had been broken, and since our major is a stickler for keeping rules, Bloody Lance was punished."

Bret swung onto the black and they started up the trail side by side.

"You can't explain army rules to a hungry Indian," he said, "and after that Bloody Lance swore he'd get even with the major. Whatever civilizing influence reservation life has had, Bloody Lance is still an Apache. He meant that threat and the major knows it."

Debbie looked at him miserably. "Oh Bret, is that why Steve is—afraid?"

"Don't misunderstand me, Debbie," Bret said quickly. "The major is no coward. His war record shows that. But most of us fear or dislike the things we don't understand. The major doesn't understand this country or how to handle the Indians who live in it. That, plus the suspicion that his garrison thinks he made a mistake in detaining Bloody Lance, is getting uner his skin."

So that was it, thought Debbie. Living with the distrust of his garrison, knowing he had the enmity of the Indians he must police, it was no wonder Steve had become irritable and unsure of himself.

"And now I suppose everybody thinks Steve is a poor officer," she said bitterly.

"The major is an excellent officer—in white man's country," said Bret, "but temperamentally, some officers are not cut out for duty in Indian country. The major is one of them."

Debbie was silent. She was shocked and deeply disturbed at what Bret had told her, yet she felt an instinctive need to defend Steve. Her heart had kept him on a hero's pedestal for so long.

"I don't think it's fair to criticize him," she burst out. "He was only doing his duty as he saw it."

Bret reached over and laid a pleading hand on hers. "Debbie, honey," he said

unhappily, "I'm not criticizing. I wouldn't have told you any of this if you hadn't asked me."

But Debbie didn't answer. Everybody, it seemed, was against the man she was going to marry, and it left her hurt and angry and thoroughly mixed up inside.

SO THEY rode back to the fort in a chilly silence, broken finally by Bret's exclamation as they walked the horses down the slope to the stables. "Looks like the major had unexpectedly good hunting," he said, nodding toward the scene before them.

The long picket lines were full, the dusty troopers rubbing down the sweaty mounts. Steve was back!

Debbie's heart sank. I knew I shouldn't have gone out there with Bret, she thought guiltily. Steve is going to be furious.

But Steve's look as he detached himself from a group of his officers and strode toward where they had dismounted, was moodily preoccupied rather than angry.

"Steve," cried Debbie a little breathlessly, "I'm glad you're back so soon. You must have caught Bloody Lance!"

"We got him as he was circling back toward the reservation to see his wife and child." Steve chopped the words out bitterly. "We had him almost back to the fort. Then, thanks to a corporal's carelessness, Bloody Lance rolled off his horse and snaked away from us into the mesquite as we crossed the creek."

Steve's blue eyes snapped frostily. "We'll get him later," he said. "Meanwhile, we managed to recover most of the rancher's stock and we have Bloody Lance's brother and two of his braves in custody."

Bret gave a low whistle. "Bloody Lance's brother in the guardhouse and a food shortage at the reservation," he muttered. "Sound to me like you've got the makings of a first class uprising on your hands!"

"If I have, I'll know how to handle it," snapped Steve.

Then, for the first time, he seemed aware of the significance of their return together. He looked from Debbie to Bret.

"Where have you been?" he demanded suspiciously, raising his voice in anger.

Bret's gaze met his squarely. "I took Debbie out to see the reservation," he said.

Steve's face darkened with jealous rage and he stepped menacingly toward Bret.

"You didn't waste any time in your campaign to steal my fianceé, did you doctor? But what was your hurry? You thought I'd be gone for a week."

"Steve, stop it," cried Debbie, clutching his arm. "It wasn't Bret's fault. I made him take me."

But Steve shook her off. "I'll instruct O'Brien to escort you on all future rides," he said, his voice cold with fury.

Then he turned back to Bret. "Stay away from her," he snarled. "I'm warning you, Holden, stay away from Debbie or I'll see to it personally that you lose your bars and the right to practice medicine anywhere in the Territory."

BRET'S jawline hardened, anger a sudden flame in his dark eyes. "When Debbie is your wife, sir, I'll stay away from her," he grated. "Meantime, if I choose to take her riding during my free hours, I'm afraid there is nothing you can do about it."

Steve's eyes narrowed to slits of blue ice. "You seem to have more free hours than you need, Doctor," he snapped. "But we can remedy that. Lieutenant Rowan leaves in less than an hour on a three week patrol. He may need a surgeon. You will accompany that patrol, Dr. Holden!"

Debbie caught her breath sharply, wondering what Bret would do. But there was no choice. He had to accept the order.

He stood a moment, white-faced, his eyes shadowed with sudden despair at the blunder his temper had led him into. Then, saluting briefly, he turned and left them with furious, booted stride.

Watching him go, anger rose suddenly in Debbie. "Steve, that was unfair," she burst out. "Sending Bret off with that patrol was unnecessary and you know it."

"I think I'm the best judge of that, Debbie," said Steve shortly. But the look of smug satisfaction on his face as he watched Bret's retreating back infuriated her.

"Steve Conover," she cried, "I think you really believe if Bret stayed here he might succeed in taking me away from you." Her lip curled contemptuously. "Well, I'm beginning to wonder if you could be right!"

She turned to go, but Steve caught her arm, and in his eyes she saw sick fear, fear that he'd gone too far, that he was losing her.

"Debbie," he whispered in a shaken voice, "Debbie, my dear, you didn't mean that? Say you didn't," he begged.

But Debbie turned her face away. Then, looking beyond Steve, her eyes widened as she saw Lieutenant Huston approaching. Beside him trotted a round, pink-faced little man with a benign expression, and as the sun flashed on his collar insignia, Debbie's heart skipped a beat. No need to wait for introductions to be told that the little man was the chaplain from Tucson—or that today would be her wedding day!

In a sudden panic that she couldn't have explained, Debbie shook off Steve's restraining hand.

"Steve, I—I've got a dreadful headache," she said hurriedly. "I'm going to my room." She turned and fled.

THE CUBBY-HOLE of a bedroom was stuffy with the midday heat, but Debbie's hands were icy-cold as she paced nervously from bed to window.

She was frightened and bewildered by the sudden turmoil of warring emotions within her. She should have been glad to see that the chaplain had come. She should have stayed and met him. Instead, she had run like a frightened child. Why?

True, she'd been angry with Steve, angry enough to say more than she meant to about his sending Bret away. But that didn't explain why she had panicked at the thought that the ceremony was so close.

It's just nerves, she told herself. Lots of brides have been known to get panicky at the last minute.

But a perverse imp at the back of her mind mocked her with the memory of Syl-

[*Turn page*]

"And now to my nephew, Eugene, I leave my bottle of Wildroot Cream-Oil, my hair's best friend!"
"Wildroot Cream-Oil relieves dryness so well, you only need a drink every fourteen days!"
WIFFO DANDRUFF REMOVER ONLY $3!
"I'll bet 29¢ Wildroot Cream-Oil does it better!"
YOUR HAIR'S BEST FRIEND
America's Favorite Hair Tonic!
WILDROOT CREAM-OIL HAIR TONIC
LANOLIN
GROOMS THE HAIR
RELIEVES DRYNESS
REMOVES LOOSE DANDRUFF
AS LITTLE AS 29¢
PLUS TAX

via's words: "You're marrying the wrong man—"

"That's not true," she whispered fiercely. "I'll not be influenced by what Sylvia or anyone else has said. I loved Steve enough to come all the way out here to marry him, and I'm going to go through with it."

She looked down at the expensive solitaire on the third finger of her left hand, remembering the soft spring night in Washington when Steve had slipped it on with a kiss. "To lock it there forever," he whispered.

Remembering the sweetness, the romance of that moment, sudden hot tears spilled over Debbie's lashes and a dull ache filled her heart.

"It's this awful country that's changed him," she whispered through quivering lips, "It's changed him so terribly."

Because now she had to admit it—the angry, unpredictable Steve she had found in this little frontier outpost was frighteningly different from the gallant, romantic officer she had come West to marry. Different from that gay and charming Steve she had known in Washington.

She paused by the low, open window. Through the flimsy curtains she could see the chaplain crossing the sun-baked parade ground beside Steve. Could see them enter Steve's office. Knew that presently Steve would be sending someone to knock on her door to ask if she felt better. To tell her it was time to dress for the wedding.

Abruptly, she turned and stared at her wedding dress that Sylvia had pressed and hung on a wall hanger beside the door. She studied the filmy tiers of white lace, the cobweb of a veil. Quite vividly she could see the way she would look wearing it, standing with her hand in Steve's. Quite plainly she could hear the chaplain's solemn question, "Wilt thou have this man to thy wedded husband?"

And suddenly all the panic she had felt at first sight of the chaplain swept over her again. "I don't know," she cried out. "I don't know!"

And driven by instinctive terror like an animal which flees a trap, Debbie ran out of the house and hurried toward the stables. She had no clear idea of where she was going or what she would do. She simply felt the need to escape.

"Oh, Miss, will ye wait a moment, please?"

IT WAS O'Brien's rich Irish voice that stopped her headlong flight, and Debbie turned, her heart constricted, half expecting this would be a summons from Steve.

O'Brien touched his garrison cap respectfully, then shot a significant glance at her riding costume.

"Begging your pardon, miss," he rumbled. "The major hasn't said so, but I don't think he'd want ye to be taking a ride this afternoon. Not with that Apache still on the loose."

Debbie looked at O'Brien, her mind searching frantically for some excuse to get away before Steve should come looking for her. Because she couldn't face him yet. Not until she'd had time to think.

"Oh, I—I'm sure there's no danger in broad daylight, O'Brien," she said, edging nervously away from him.

"Miss—" a grim effort at patience made O'Brien's red face grow redder—"being from the East and all, ye might not believe it, but that heathen Apache is probably skulking out there in the brush right now just waiting—"

"Nonsense, O'Brien," interrupted Debbie impatiently. "Bloody Lance wouldn't dare come near the fort, and I'm not going far. I'm not afraid, but you needn't come if you don't want to."

Disapproval was written all over O'Brien's broad face, but all he said was, "If ye're that set on it, Miss, I'll go saddle up. 'Tis the major's orders I'm not to let ye out of me sight when ye ride."

They hadn't gone far, less than a mile from the fort, when they saw the first signal smoke. Then another. And another mushrooming from a distant saw-toothed butte.

"There'll be drums in the hills tonight," muttered O'Brien darkly. "I don't like it, miss. We'd best turn back."

It was then, before Debbie could make a

reply, that her horse spooked, and even as she fought to control the plunging animal, a dozen half-naked, copper-skinned figures seemed to rise from the ground and swarm over them.

With a terrified cry, Debbie saw O'Brien warclubbed and jerked from his horse even as he clawed the army Colt from its holster. And too late, Debbie remembered the little gun Steve had given her, the little gun that still lay in the drawer at the fort.

She screamed once as they dragged her from the saddle, then a dirty brown hand was clapped over her mouth. She fought desparately, clawing in panic at the evil faces and bare arms, her jacket half torn from her in the struggle. But it was no use and she was half carried, half pulled through the thorney mesquite to a hidden draw.

Then she heard the muted sound of unshod hoofs drumming up the sandy wash. A moment later a tall, magnificently built Indian in reservation-issue trousers and little else but a purple head band that held back his long black hair, flung down from his pony's bare back.

He spoke sharply to the others. Immediately they stood away from her, and Debbie guessed that the tall Indian was Bloody Lance.

SHE STOOD trembling while he walked all around her, looking her up and down. And in that moment all the stories of horror she'd heard about the fate of white women taken by Indians rushed through her mind. Then, to her surprise, Bloody Lance spoke to her in guttural, broken English.

"You—" he demanded, jabbing a dirty forefinger at her, "you—major's woman?"

There was hatred of Steve in his eyes, contempt for Steve in his voice, and back of it, she knew, burned the memory of his imprisonment at Steve's hands. Debbie realized she was face to face with the thing that had shaken Steve to his soul's depths—the certainty that Bloody Lance would get revenge. And he's got the chance of a lifetime to get it through me, she thought.

But it wouldn't do to let him see the panic she felt, and thrusting out her little chin, Debbie stared in silent defiance at the bony brown face above her.

Abruptly, Bloody Lance turned his back on her, and pointing to O'Brien who sprawled frighteningly white and still on the floor of the wash, he exchanged quick words with the others.

Then he turned and seized Debbie's arm, and when she pulled frantically away, he bent the arm back cruelly until she screamed. Again and again she screamed. Then Bloody Lance struck her.

It was a quick, glancing blow just back of her ear, and Debbie felt her knees buckle, felt herself falling into a great black pit of dizziness. She was aware of being lifted and flung to the pony's back. Aware of being held in an iron-muscled grip that cramped her arm agonizingly beneath her. Aware of the stench of rancid grease and sweat.

Then she lost track of time, lost consciousness of everything but pain and the jogging motion of the pony. . . .

The gloom of late afternoon already filled the deep, red-walled canyon where they stopped at last, and Debbie was flung to the ground.

Even as she dragged her stiff body to a sitting position, she heard the excited babble of voices around her and smelled the woodsmoke of cookfires. This, she knew, must be Bloody Lance's hideout in a cleft of the rocky hills she had seen at a distance.

Her head throbbing, Debbie looked unsteadily about her. Bret had been right—holding Bloody Lance's brother at the fort had started something big. It looked as though half the tribes on the reservation had come up in the hills to join the outlaw Apache chief.

Debbie looked up to find him watching her curiously. He gestured toward the camp.

"Bloody Lance lead many warriors," he boasted. "Got more warriors than major."

He grinned at her evilly. "Now got major's woman. Can kill major's woman. But Bloody Lance reservation Indian. Blood Lance's heart is big. Major give back my brother, Bloody Lance give back major's woman."

Was there a chance he was telling the

truth? Apaches, Bret had said, loved to appear magnanimous, to be generous to an enemy when it suited their purpose. And Bloody Lance's people, he'd said, had been anxious to learn the white man's ways. But Debbie could find no hint of these things in the cruel, dark face with its arrogant nose.

She laughed shortly with a defiance she didn't feel. "Don't worry," she told him, "by now the major is already on his way up here. He'll kill you and all your warriors for this."

But his stiffly-haired black head with its gaudy purple head band shook in slow negation. "Bloody Lance's lodge well hidden. Major, not find. Soldier who ride with you take message back to fort—major not let my brother go by light of next sun, my warriors ride to fort, kill and burn."

His dirty teeth bared in a wicked grin. "Then kill you too!" he said with malicious enjoyment. He signaled two of his braves.

Debbie fought them desperately, but it was useless. Roughly, they bound her wrists together with rawhide thongs. She kicked out furiously with the heels of her riding boots, but in the end they managed to bind her ankles and she was thrust rudely into one of the brush wickiups near the big fire and left alone.

OUTSIDE, the din was growing more hideous by the minute. The remorseless, repetitive throb of the skin drums had started at sundown, augmented by the high-pitched, minor key chant of the warriors who swayed in hypnotic rhythm in the shadows back of the drums.

Suddenly, out of the darkness back of the crackling flames of the high-built fire, leaped the dancers, naked torsos, arms and faces daubed with war paint, bells on their buckskin breechclouts and high moccasins jangling shrilly. And to Debbie, the meaning of their weird, piercing cries and fierce posturings with knives was only too plain. It was death to the white captive.

She lay on the floor of the wickiup, wrists raw and bloody from her efforts to saw through her bonds by rubbing them on the sharp rocks in the dirt floor. But the rawhide had held. Completely exhausted, Debbie could only lie, numb and trembling, looking into the grim face of certain death.

Where was Steve? Why didn't he come after her? Surely with her life as forfeit if he refused. Steve wouldn't quibble over releasing Bloody Lance's brother. Or would his stubborn prejudice against the Indians make him blunder again this time?

It had been hours since her capture, how many she had no idea. O'Brien must have long since returned to the fort with Bloody Lance's ultimatum. Unless—a damp chill crept up Debbie's spine at the thought—unless O'Brien had died from the blow of the warclub before he could get back and tell Steve the terms of her release.

Perhaps Steve had frantically scoured some other part of the country looking for her, unaware that Bloody Lance would wait only for dawn to kill her and launch an attack on the fort.

Through the wickiup's door, her eyes strained upward to the faraway stars, trying to judge the degree of darkness around them. How many hours left until dawn?

Debbie moaned helplessly and pushed herself up to get a better view of the activity around the fire. A sour smell hung in the air now, apparently coming from the earthen pots from which the savages drank frequently.

The sinister tempo of the drums had stepped up, the dancing become more frenzied, and Debbie shuddered. If those earthen jugs held *tiswin*, the native beer Bret had told her about, she knew the hours ahead could hold only horror for her, until she died. Bret had hinted at the way *tiswin*-maddened Apaches behaved.

If only Steve hadn't sent Bret on that patrol! Bret would have known how to find her. He knew this country and he knew Indians. But now, when she needed him so desperately, he was gone and she had Steve to thank for it.

THEN DEBBIE caught her breath in terror. The chanting and the drums had stopped! The silence at the fire was expectant. Then he saw the figures, hideous in feathered, ceremonial headdress, moving purposefully toward her, and she

fought to stifle the scream that rose in her throat.

They seized her like pouncing animals, and Debbie, tearing at her bonds, struggling with the desperation of the trapped, managed to wrench away from them once. But when they dragged her to her feet again she found herself face to face with Bloody Lance.

She tried to hold them back, but the words burst from her dry lips in spite of herself. "You said you'd wait until dawn," she cried hysterically.

Then she'd have given anything to have taken back the words that betrayed her terror as she saw the quick gleam of anticipation in Bloody Lance's *tiswin*-reddened eyes. It was anticipation of a long-awaited revenge on Steve.

"You not die until dawn," he said slowly, his face filled with hate. "Sometimes takes long time for white woman to die."

He made a vicious gesture and her captors dragged her before the inner row of warriors crouched about the fire.

Now, again, the drums began their song of death, and as the savage, accented rhythm echoed back from the canyon walls, the painted dancers with their demon shrieks leaped again into the circle of the firelight. And this time they carried lances.

The first lance point jabbed close, so close Debbie could feel the rush of air behind it. Then the second. She tried not to wince. She wanted to scream, but her throat had closed. She was paralyzed with terror. And then she realized the ring of savage eyes were watching, hoping she would break, and deep within her a small spark of anger stirred.

In a last desperate effort at courage, she forced herself to lift her chin, but it was no good. Her numbed legs gave way, and in spite of herself, she sank to her knees, her head dropping forward with a little sob.

And suddenly the drum song died. The savage yells trailed off and in the deathlike silence that followed, an Indian dog howled. A mutter swept the crowd, and slowly Debbie raised her eyes.

On the opposite side of the fire the Indians were falling back before someone who approached from the darkness beyond. Then a strangled cry that was half a sob rose in Debbie's throat as Bret's tall form, alone and unarmed, advanced slowly into the firelight, his white-gauntleted palms held away from his body to show that he came in friendship.

"I've come for my woman, Bloody Lance," he said simply, and Debbie felt the thrill of those words to the core of her being.

Bloody Lance, taken off guard, let surprise show for an instant on his savage face.

"She is major's woman," he stated flatly. "My brother not back soon, she must die."

Bret's dark eyes were unwavering. "You have made a bad mistake, Bloody Lance," he said calmly. "It is my woman you have stolen. And because I have been a good friend to you and your people, you will give her back to me."

FOR A MOMENT, Bloody Lance wavered. Then flaming rage, fanned by the fumes of *tiswin*, contorted his face. "Not so, white doctor," he snarled. "You not real friend. Your coat is blue like major's. And major trick Bloody Lance's people. Major tell them: 'Come live on reservation. Help dig hole for white man's river. White man give you food.' "

Bloody Lance's lips drew back contemptuously, his voice boomed to an angry shout. "But food not come. Bloody Lance's people get hungry. Try to get own food. Major not like this. Major put Bloody Lance in jail. Now got Bloody Lance's brother in jail."

Suddenly Bloody Lance sprang toward Bret, and Debbie screamed as she saw the knife gleam in his hand.

"Major not give back my brother. Why should Bloody Lance give back your woman?" he shouted. "Answer that, white doctor."

Bret didn't move though the knife was a scant inch from his chest.

Debbie marveled at the calmness of his tone as he said quietly, "Once your son was near death, Bloody Lance, but my medicine gave him back to you. Now, be-

cause of that, you will give my woman back to me. As for the major, it was not his fault that the government food wagons were late. And when you and your people broke the law, it was the major's duty to punish you. But even so, he forgives you and wishes to show that he is your friend.

"To prove this, he has taken flour and fat beef from his own stores at the fort and sent them to the reservation for your hungry people. The major will wait on the river trail at dawn. When he sees you and your people returning to the reservation, he will give your brother back to you alive. But if you do not agree to this, he will attack you with many long knives and you and your brother and all your people will die."

For a moment Bloody Lance stared at Bret in savage arrogance, indecision and hatred of all white men blazing from his eyes. Then, abruptly, he whirled and with an imperious gesture, he gathered his warriors about him at the far side of the fire.

Instantly, Bret was beside Debbie, kneeling to cut her bonds with a knife from his pocket.

"Debbie, have they hurt you?" he whispered through white lips, and when she shook her head, he caught her to him and held her close.

She clung to him, trembling uncontrollably. "Oh Bret, I was so frightened," she sobbed.

"I still am," he said, his voice low and grim. He nodded toward the old Indian who was speaking in impassioned tones amid cries of approval from around the fire.

"That's my old rival, the medicine man," Bret said. "If he has his way, we may not get out of here alive."

"I'm not afraid—now," Debbie whispered, looking up at him. Then her eyes widened. "Bret, you left the fort before I did. How did you know what had happened to me?"

"Our patrol didn't get far." Bret spoke rapidly, his eyes never leaving the angry, shouting savages at the fire. "Luckily for all of us, O'Brien has a thick skull. As soon as he got back to the fort with Bloody Lance's message, the major sent a scout after us. He knew if Bloody Lance attacked, he'd need every available man back at the fort."

"Oh Bret, why didn't Steve let that Indian's brother go?" she cried. "I think at first Bloody Lance would have kept his word and released me."

"He would have," said Bret shortly. "Apaches pride themselves on keeping a promise, but the major wouldn't believe that."

His voice went bitter as he added, "It was a fine example of distrust all the way around. The major refused to let Bloody Lance's brother go on the mere promise that you would be released when he returned. And Bloody Lance's brother refused to tell where you might be hidden or to lead the major up here for fear it was a trip to massacre his people."

Bret drew a ragged breath and pulled her closer. "Oh Deb, we were all half crazy when the last patrol got in to report no trace of you by dark. That was when the major agreed to let me see what I could do. I talked to Bloody Lance's brother, and on the promise I'd come alone, he finally told me how to get up here."

Debbie shot him a quick look. "Bret, how did you ever persuade Steve to send food to the reservation?"

Bret's lips tightened. "I almost didn't," he said, "but I finally made him see that since talk was the only weapon I had against Bloody Lance's hatred of him, I'd better be able to say something that made him look more like a friend if we were to get you out of here."

Bret stared anxiously toward the fire. There was ominous silence there now.

"I don't like it," he muttered. "With all that *tiswin* in them, there's no telling what they'll do."

"Bret, they're coming!" gasped Debbie.

They were coming, all right. Coming slowly, menacingly, with scowling faces, Bloody Lance in the lead. Bret raised Debbie to her feet, his arms protectingly around her as Bloody Lance swaggered forward, his bony face dark and unreadable. He made them wait a full minute before he spoke.

"Bloody Lance and his people go back." There was condescension in his haughty tone, a glitter of savage sadism in his eyes. "But doctor and woman ride in front, my warrior's arrows ready for their backs. Major not there with my brother, doctor and woman will die."

Bret looked at him, his mouth grim. "It is agreed," he said shortly. "I will get the horses I have brought for my woman and myself.

THE EASTERN sky was a paling gray as they rode down the trail, and Debbie, involuntarily tensing in the saddle, tried not to think of the feathered shafts of death at their backs, shafts that would be released on the instant if Bloody Lance and his warriors decided they were riding into a trap.

And finally it was dawn, the sun's rays spilling like a sudden gush of blood on the red sandstone cliffs by the trail as the strange cavalcade wound down to the valley of green mesquite that spread away to the muddy river below.

Then they rounded a bend. Across a little clearing ringed by scrubby mesquite, Debbie saw Steve and his troopers drawn up waiting, carbines ready across their saddles.

Bret drew rein, looking questioningly at Bloody Lance. The Apache's eyes were scanning the group at the far side of the clearing. Then, apparently satisfied at what he saw, he grunted, "You go!"

"This is it," Bret muttered to Debbie. "I hope nobody starts shooting from either side because we'll be in the middle. Come on!"

Debbie's heart hammered against her ribs as they spurred ahead, leaving the Indians at the edge of the clearing. Then, to her relief, she saw Bloody Lance's brother and the other two braves trotting their ponies forward. Steve's mount followed them across the clearing. Apparently he was coming to meet her.

His eyes swept over her as he drew abreast of them. Then the blood rushed to his face as he took in her tattered jacket and disheveled hair. Without any warning, Steve whipped around and would have leveled the carbine he held at the retreating back of Bloody Lance's brother.

But Bret grabbed his arm even as he raised it. "Don't be a fool, sir!" he growled. "Debbie is unharmed, and you gave your word that the prisoners would be returned alive."

"You mean *you* gave my word!" snarled furiously. "Debbie, my dear," he said turning to her, "I want you to know that none of this was my idea. I wanted to follow Dr. Holden to the Indian camp with the troop and destroy those savages, but our gallant doctor had a better plan that enabled him to be the sole hero."

Debbie looked at Steve, her first impulse to point out that it was Bret who had saved face for him with the Indians, who had persuaded them, without bloodshed, to return to the reservation.

But she saw that it was useless, saw for the first time what a small man Steve really was, not in physical stature, but in mind and soul. It took a lot of man to fill a saddle out here, and Steve simply didn't measure up to the standards of this raw new country in which he had clumsily held his command.

And he never will, thought Debbie pityingly. Her tone was not unkind as she said, "Whatever you may think of the gallant doctor and his scheme, Steve, I have him to thank that I'm still alive."

Slowly she drew the engagement ring from her finger. "When I started on that ride yesterday I was trying to make up my mind whether or not to do this. Well, I've made up my mind."

For a moment Steve looked down, stunned, at the ring she put into his hand, then his oddly light blue eyes met hers and he said in a choked voice, "I'm sorry, my dear. Good-by!"

Touching his hat in salute, he turned his mount and spurred back to his men. Erect in the saddle, but with face the color of ashes, Steve snapped out a command, and the order, "Twos. Twos right. At the trot!" rapped across the clearing and the troop moved smartly down the trail in the direction of the fort.

DEBBIE turned in time to catch a curious look, almost of pity, on Bret's face as he watched the slowly settling dust of the troop. Then he looked at her, his left eyebrow shooting upward, the old quizzical smile in his eyes.

"So there isn't going to be any wedding at the fort after all?" he said.

"That's right," Debbie said quietly.

Bret's dark gaze sobered. "I suppose nobody can blame you if you head East again. After everything that's happened, you must hate Arizona worse than ever."

Debbie looked beyond him, beyond the rocky hills where slender clouds like red-feathered lances hung above mesas blue in the morning distance.

"That's the funny part of it, Bret," she said slowly, examining the thought with faint surprise, "I don't seem to hate it any more."

Then she looked at him oddly. "Steve said you'd be leaving Fort Weston. Will it be soon?"

"My orders came by courier yesterday afternoon," he said. "I report in Tucson by the end of the week. Why do you ask?"

"I was just thinking," she murmured, sudden mischief dancing in her hazel eyes. "If I had to live on an army post, I think I'd like it at Tucson."

Bret reined the black close to her mount and his arm went swiftly around her waist.

"Debbie," he whispered, "Debbie darling. I know what you're trying to say. But this time don't say it unless you're sure."

"I am sure, Bret," she said, looking steadily into his eyes. "Maybe it *was* the excitement of the war, of Washington, that made me think I loved Steve in the beginning. But out here it's been different. And when I heard you tell Bloody Lance that I was your woman, I knew it was true. I knew it had always been true."

Her arms went up around his neck. "Oh Bret, take me with you," she whispered. "Wherever you go from now on, take me with you!"

For answer, his lips found hers, and they both knew that this time their love would last forever.

THE BEAR FACTS

A BLIZZARD HOWLING DOWN from James peak in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado filled the cuts of the old Denver Pacific Railroad stalling a two-car passenger train in Rollins Pass, many years ago. The mercury dipped to almost thirty below.

After bucking snow for hours in a vain effort to gain the summit, nearly 14,000 feet above sea level, the engineer reversed and headed back toward a small logging camp, named Arrow. He had not gone half a mile when snow completely blocked his way. To make matters worse, the water in his engine gave out.

Coaches in those days were wooden, giving scant protection against the shrieking winds. Snow drifted in through window crevices and under doors. Night was closing in. To stay aboard the unheated train with no food would mean suffering and possibly death to some fourteen persons, passengers and crew. The conductor, a veteran of mountain railroading, gathered them around him and said, "This storm may last for two or three days. Our best hope of survival is to walk back to Arrow. It's about eleven miles. There's a good chance that we can make it. The sooner we get started, the better. Any questions?"

With the bell cord they formed a human chain, tying it to the waists of the eleven men and three women, and started down the mountain side. About nine o'clock that night they staggered into Arrow, half-frozen, tired and famished. There they ate and rested.

It was three days before the relief party, sent out by the railroad, reached the snowbound train. In the engine cab, they found a strange visitor. Curled up on the deck, as if it were a mountain cave, a grizzly bear lay sleeping peacefully. The rescuers prodded him awake and forced him out. As he lumbered reluctantly toward the woods, growling his discontent, they filled the empty tank with water and built a fire in the firebox. They they headed down to Arrow to pick up the stranded passengers and crew. ——*Freeman H. Hubbard*

Farewell Supper

By Seth Ranger

HE'D DO ANYTHING for her—if it turned out his way

JUST BEFORE Young Doc Elliott and his fiancée, Janice, left his car for the farewell banquet at the Elks' Hall, she threw her arms about his neck, kissed him and whispered, "You are giving up so much for me. I'll love you devotedly as long as I live."

Young Doc responded and for several minutes afterwards they sat in the car quite shaken. This was Janice's hour of victory. She was taking Young Doc from his limited opportunity in his home town, to the city where his skill would be recognized and paid for.

The people from the small town, the outlying ranches and mines had watched Doc grow to maturity, had given him farewell parties when he went off to medical school, and welcoming parties when he returned home. They loved Young Doc as he loved them.

It was two years ago that she had spent her vacation in Barkerville. The instant she'd laid eyes on Young Doc she'd thought: He's the one I've been looking for. But this is a country of long night drives to see patients, a country of slow and low pay. I'll have to get him out of here. And if he loves me enough, he'll see my viewpoint and move to where there's real opportunity.

She had made progress, but Young Doc

"You are giving up so much for me," she said

hadn't proposed. She had returned home, only to spend the next vacation in Barkerville to continue her project. She knew the instant Young Doc had kissed her that he had missed her during the long winter months as much as she had missed him.

Janice realized the ranch country people were trying to hold him and to reach her. They wanted to make her one of them, and offered their warmth and love. Many of them began calling her Mrs. Elliott and to act as if she would remain.

When she went home, she was wearing Young Doc's ring. Now she was back to take him home with her for the wedding. She had arranged for him to be accepted into one of the city's most important clinics, the Garvin.

She heard the gossip going the rounds, Asa Barrows, the newspaper editor saying, "Janice will never stay here. She's beautiful, ambitious, cultured, and has poise and leadership. In the city she'll complement Young Doc. Loving her as he does, he can't hold out against her plans for him."

Joe Smith, the druggist, had argued, "You're wrong, Asa. His roots have gone deep here. He's sure the public will beat a path to a good man's door. His door is here. Believing that, he will go round, in his quiet way, diagnosing the case and prescribing a remedy."

Janice had been in Barkerville a week before she heard talk of the farewell banquet. Young Doc was so enthusastic over the idea there was talk that he had suggested it to Joe Smith. These rumors were discounted. That wasn't like Young Doc, who was modest as well as resourceful. It wasn't like him at all.

But Janice knew that Young Doc had said, "Let's not call it a banquet. That sounds like something for an important politician, banker or general. Let's call it a supper and charge four bits a plate, so everyone can get in on it."

NOW, AS Janice, her hand squeezing Young Doc's arm, walked slowly from the car to the Elks' Hall, she was conscious of a tightening in the stomach and a strong, unbidden sense of guilt.

But I'm not guilty, she thought furiously. I'm doing it for his own good. He realizes that now. Otherwise he would have said, "This is my home. A girl follows a man to his home and place of business."

But it was difficult to imagine Young Doc in a hard-boiled rôle, and perhaps that was the reason he hadn't been firm with her.

Here and there people on the street who couldn't take time for the supper, halted them and wished them happiness and good fortune.

Again they called her Mrs. Elliott, and smiled the way people do whose friendship is a substantial thing. She saw Young Doc glance at his office in the Tuesley Building across the street, and remembered he had said, "I'll send for what I need later." Could I be making a mistake? she asked herself. She answered—no!

Then they were moving slowly through the crowded room toward the head table, where there were flowers and the ranch country's prominent men. They were seated at last and things quieted down.

Young Doc looked often at Janice, his expression filled with the special tenderness and admiration the women had noticed whenever he looked at her from the first day they'd met.

"To you, Janice," he was saying, "they're probably a mass of ranch country folks jammed into the hall. To me, each is a warm personal friend as well as a patient. See the big fellow with the horrible necktie?" She wanted to laugh. There was adoration on the tough-looking man's face. "He's the one who was pinned down in that mine cave-in."

She remembered Young Doc had gone into the mine while rocks continued to fall and amputated the man's leg. And just in time, too, because another big slide blocked the area for days.

A nine-year-old boy was beaming for recognition, and he flushed happily when Young Doc said, "Hi, Jerry." To Janice he whispered, "Jerry thinks I'm a hero. Ruptured appendix. Close call, but my part was simple enough."

"I remember," Janice answered. "The pain had stopped and folks thought he was out of trouble, but his mother had read in the papers about such things deceiving people, and called you."

"The Lawrence boy is on deck again," Young Doc said, and waved at a fifteen-year-old lad.

Janice remembered a horse had rolled on the boy, and that Young Doc had paced the hospital corridor for hours, fists clenched, softly cursing after he had done all a surgeon could do, as he awaited the outcome of this combat with death.

"The bronzed chap," Young Doc said, "is Mike McCord, forest ranger." Mike came up to the head table and shook hands, then was introduced to Janice.

She recalled that Mike, retreating from a forest fire, had fallen over a sheer wall and suffered many broken bones. When he recovered a Humpty-Dumpty jingle had gone the rounds, "All the King's horses and all the King's men, couldn't put Mike together again, but Young Doc did."

"The lady with the old-fashioned clothes is Grandma Jessup," he said. "I almost lost her that night."

"Pneumonia, wasn't it?" she said, remembering the night. The wind had howled and she had been awake hours imagining things. "Isn't the little blond boy with the red cheeks the one you made the steel leg brace for?"

"Right," Young Doc answered. "His leg is as good as ever now. That operation gave me a lot of satisfaction." He dabbed away at his food, while his eyes roved the room. "There's Mrs. Kelso, end seat, second row. I warned her against fats. She's put butter on things. She'll pay for it."

Mrs. Kelso caught his expression. She smiled defiantly, and her lips formed the words, "This is a special occasion."

Special occasion all right, Young Doc thought, but Nature doesn't recognize them.

"Who is the robust lass who looked at you and blushed just now?" Janice asked.

"I had to tell her things her mother never got around to mentioning," he answered. "Sitting just beyond her is Hannah O'Grady. I delivered children numbers four, five and six. Number seven is due next year."

"Who will take care of her? She seems to be wearing a Lord-will-provide expression," Janice said.

"Doc Bender from Moisan City," he answered, "if it's in the daytime. Doc doesn't accept night calls except in dire emergency. His eyes aren't what they used to be and occasionally he spots a curve a split second too late and ends up in the ditch.

"Laugh at the horse if you will," he went on, "but in those days the horse saw the turn in plenty of time, and a doctor could sleep between calls. If Doc Bender can't make it, my current competition, Mrs. Kennedy, the midwife will take over. And, I trust, bring in the stork to a three point landing."

BY NOW, some had finished their supper and were waiting for the program to start. Caught off-guard, faces betrayed thoughts and fears once masked by smiles. There was Hank Forsythe who stoutly insisted he would have died but for Young Doc, and this was true. He was beginning to have those spells again. He looked pretty worried, then he saw Young Doc smiling at him and he grinned and a sparkle came into his eyes.

"Oh, damn," Young Doc said softly. "I wish they wouldn't look at me like that."

Young Doc felt quick pleasure as a young woman waved.

"Who is she?" Janice asked. "She's lovely."

"Sandra Lane."

"Oh," Janice said, and remembered.

T.B. spine, and Young Doc had operated dangerously close to the spinal cord in removing the diseased bone. Then he had grafted a strip of bone from her leg. Now she was back on her old job and remembered him in her prayers.

Joe Smith rapped for silence and the buzz trailed to belated whispers and the hall grew quiet.

"Young Doc's fame has spread," Joe said. "He's leaving Barkerville. We're proud that the skill of one of our boys has been recognized by the best in the land. We're glad he has this opportunity. And for strictly selfish reasons that each of us understands, we're sorry to see him go.

"He has left his home and office ready for the doctor whom we hope will take his place, professionally. He will never be replaced in our hearts. As yet the subject of a new doctor has not been taken up. Until arrangements have been made, we'll have to rely on Doc Bender over Moisan City way.

"Doc, we know that you will be a credit to Barkerville, and that in your Janice you will have a wife who will complement you in every respect. We hope that in your new position she will see more of you than she has here.

"We are a demanding people, I am afraid, so much so that you two will have to be married a hundred years before you could properly say that you had been married fifty years and were going to celebrate your golden wedding. Folks—I give you Young Doc."

It was quite a long time before the applause died down. At first he stood up and stuttered, then he sat down, tilted back in his chair and talked to them just as he did when they called on him professionally. And each somehow accepted it as a personal talk.

And when he was through he walked to the door, as he had always done, and the nearest man shook hands, wished him well, and stepped out into the night. Then Janice was at his side sharing in the farewells.

"Denny," he said to one, "just don't lose your temper and you'll be okay." To another, "Mike, I'm taking the *Barkerville Times,* and if you run upstairs I'll know about it."

"Yeah," Mike answered grimly, "and the notice will say, Please omit flowers. I'll be a good dog."

The last of them were gone and they were alone except for Asa Barrows and Joe Smith.

"S'long," Asa said, "I've got to write a piece about this, Doc, set it up and then put the paper to bed. Mrs. Elliott, with you behind him, he can't help but go far. Tonight you looked into the living, beating heart of America. We don't often have that opportunity. But twice before in my lifetime."

He was old and wise, and he gave her a friendly little pat on the shoulder and she felt an odd tenseness leave her body.

He watched me all the evening, and I figured he disliked me, she thought.

She watched him cross the street to the battered building housing his plant, and she noticed one shoulder was lower than the other, as if life's burden had lacked even distribution. She saw him turn on the light, fire up his pipe, sit down to an aged typewriter and begin hammering away with two fingers. He wrote, but of course she was too far away to read:

YOUNG DOC AIN'T GOIN'

Sometimes he wrote in that vein, when he had a very special story.

Joe Smith put his arm around Young Doc and said, "Drop me a line some time. Good-by, Janice. You're swell people, you two. Where're you stopping tonight?"

"We'll drive along awhile, then stop," Young Doc answered. Then he helped Janice into the car.

IT WAS after midnight, but many a farmhouse in the outlying districts had one or more lighted windows—folks just getting to bed after the farewell supper. As they drove, the lights went out, like stars blotted out by clouds.

Young Doc slowed down after a while and uttered a very professional, "Hmmmmm."

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Lights on at Vinton's. They weren't at the doings tonight. Someone must be sick over there. Let's see, the baby isn't due for a week yet—"

He broke off and drove on slowly. They saw a car headlight dance down a side road and turn into the farm. "Yep," he

said briefly, "the stork is on his way. That was my competition, Mrs. Kennedy."

There was a long silence, then Janice shuddered. "Hadn't you better sort of check to see if things are okay?"

"Nope," he answered. "A clean break with Barkerville is better. If I stick my nose into Vinton's she'll take hope and then—nope!"

Another long silence, then Janice said, "I think you should—well, at least take a quick peek through the window. Here's where you turn in."

He turned in and Vinton met them at the door. "Saw your light and wondered," Young Doc said. "But I see that Mrs. Kennedy is on the job—"

"Thank God you're here," Mrs. Kennedy burst out. Then she began gathering up her belongings.

"Are things *that* bad?" Janice inquired.

"They always are with her," Mrs. Kennedy said.

Janice sat down and tried to look at a magazine, but she was almost as nervous as Vinton, who was pacing the floor and mopping his brow. She could hear Young Doc trying to quiet a hysterical woman who at times yelled like a painted Indian.

Young Doc came out finally and said, "She'll be okay, Vinton."

THEY GOT into the car and drove down to the highway. A sign pointing to the right read, *Barkerville—18 Miles.* "Turn right," she said. He turned right.

"Those people," she said. "Their need of you. All through the supper I could see it in their faces, when they relaxed and were off guard. And some of them were afraid—so afraid."

"Yes, that's one of the things a doctor combats, fear. Of course, when a patient knows him, and has faith, there's little if any of fear. It's one hell of a responsibility at times," he said.

"And that Mrs. Kennedy, without training—" She shivered. "You don't want to leave Barkerville, do you?"

"No."

"Never have?"

"No."

"There was a rumor, darling, that you engineered this farewell supper all by yourself."

"You can't prove rumors," he answered her.

"Did you?"

"Yes," he admitted.

"To—open my eyes?" she asked him, smiling a little.

"That's one way of putting it, but I rather felt it was the best way, the fairest way of presenting the situation to you," he said. "I wanted you to meet and know my patients."

"What plans had you made in case I refused?" she asked.

"Why, none," he answered. "You see I know the girl I'm marrying. I figured after the honeymoon you'd want to return."

She snuggled up close to him. "That Mrs. Vinton, carrying on the way she did! She would have convinced me of their need of you if the others hadn't. It was a fortunate coincidence."

He could have told her it was no coincidence at all, but that he could count on her carrying on for several weeks before the baby was due, driving her husband crazy and giving the doctor hectic moments, whenever he appeared. Wisely, Young Doc Elliott decided to mention this later.

"Darling," she said thoughtfully, "you're marvelous. Why not a clinic here instead of you going to an established one. The Elliott Clinic."

"I've had that in mind," he said. "But those things take time."

"We have the time," she said. "You can't drive and kiss me, so I'll kiss you. I think you're cute."

It was a nice kiss, so nice that Young Doc wished that time might roll back, because horses drove themselves and gave young doctors time to sleep between calls, or kiss their wives or sweethearts without being highway hazards.

A GIRL TO REMEMBER

By W. Edmunds Claussen

NEXT TIME, MAYBE he'd fall for a woman who respected a man instead of counting his cattle

THE FIRST SHOT came from his left. He veered into the mesquite, dragging out his heavy-handled Navy, putting spurs to his roan and nosing him into the muzzle flame. Only one bushwacker, he thought. A hell of a time to ambush a man. When he's on his way to a wedding!

They didn't want him to show up in Cimarron, of course. No, it wouldn't be Dutch Murrel, the bridegroom. A man didn't go out on his wedding night and murder a neighbor. It was Tony Graham. He'd pick this as an excuse to kill him. And then maybe Murrel would take the blame.

The shells were screaming around his ears. He leveled his big Colt and threw his first shot at the spitting gunfire. Had there been a muffled cry in answer? He wasn't sure.

He shot again, twice. And then his horse went down like a poled steer and he jerked his boots out of his oxbows. By the time he came to his feet he could hear the drumming of the other's hoofs. Whoever it had been had lifted his tail and run.

That made it appear less like either Murrel or Graham. Both those gents had guts. But this fellow thought him dead.

He pulled his saddle and bridle and limped out to the stage road and sat them down in the dust. He wiped the sweat from his brow and looked back up the hill. The stage could still get him into Cimarron in time for the wedding.

Her face held a loveliness he couldn't deny

He was a tall, spare man, John Clark. Moonlight slashed the long lines of his jaw giving his face a hard, tight look. He wore the blue riding jeans of the range, a fresh checked gingham shirt, and a dark coat over this. The coat was special, tonight.

There was no sign of the stage yet, and he let out a long held breath. It seemed, as he thought back over his broken love affair, that men had lost women since time first began. He didn't give a damn now about Claire. Murrel had won her and was going to marry her tonight. To hell with her, then.

Sometimes it was good to lose a woman. It was good if a maid led on her man thinking some day she would be his; gave him this understanding not alone with the words of her mouth, but also by the look in her eyes, from the way she let her lips cling to him.

If she did this and then turned him down, with no better excuse than the other man had the capacity to earn greater wealth—it was better it should end this way. Better to find it out now, John Clark thought soberly, than a dozen years later when she had taken the strength of his useful years.

But dammit, they didn't even want him to come to the wedding!

Now the rattle of the coach reached him. The drumming sound of the horses came through the dark. He heard them slow as they struck the opposite switchback, the long strain of the pull on them. Now he glimpsed the coach lights dancing

around in the timber, and he stooped and hoisted his saddle.

He was standing in the center of the chuck-hole trail with one arm above his head when the horses pulled in sight. The whisper of anger still shone from his face and he looked grim.

The driver leaned back on his leaders and pulled to a stand. It was Buckhorn McGill. He was looking down with a slow, wondering smile cracking his mouth.

He waited first to shift tobacco cud from one cheek to the other. Then he exploded in a gruff sort of humor, "Going to crash the wedding, Johnny?"

John Clark stared at the driver on the stage box. "A man's always got that right. Even when it's not his own wedding."

There was another rider sharing the driver's seat. Buckhorn chuckled, "You'll have to ride inside. And I got a lady in there. Maybe she won't want you riding with her. You look so blamed rough."

JOHN SWORE and walked to the rear, pulled himself across the boot and laid his saddle on the cargo roof. He dropped back to the trail, brushing coach dust from his coat. It was then the light from the brass-mounted lantern picked out the glitter of something.

He picked it from the trail and it lay within his brown hand. A button, with its faint tracing of black broadcloth still caught to its thread-holes. Odd how a man could find a thing so small amid the limitless expanse of the trail. Strange that it should withstand the blast of a .44 slug. A thousand to one chance in the night. Surely this was some way by which fate was making amends for her many misdoings.

"Hurry up," Buckhorn chortled. He emitted a long streamer and then something got inside him and he chuckled. "Be a hot time in Cimarron City tonight."

John Clark's face had pulled into a frown as he rounded the stage boot. Now he stood with one hand on the stage door, his dark, sharp brows lifted at an angle. Yet he quelled the answer he had ready for Buckhorn. His boot touched the coach step and a small smile worked over his mouth.

The girl sat in the forward riding seat and Clark fell against the opposite side as Buckhorn whipped his teams. He touched his hat and smiled politely, hardly noting her beyond this. Yet he thought of her safety.

He reached to each side and drew the blinds. He didn't want himself recognized and have someone fill the coach with lead. His mind traced back to the way his horse had been shot and anger returned to him.

He hadn't thought this of Dutch Murrel. Murrel had all the breaks. He had won the girl, he had everything—cattle and water and rangeland. Knee-deep range left him by his father. The old man had run gaunted, horny stuff in here first and taken all the free range he could get. But now Murrel was growing ambitious. He wanted to be spoken of as the cattle baron.

But he could hardly blame Murrel for his ambition. It was Tony Graham leading him on. A couple of years back Tony had come in with a handful of cows and bulls, some pretty good stuff, John Clark admitted, and a year later he had taken the Ponil country and chased a dozen nester families out with his guns.

Graham hadn't shipped much. He'd taken more and more land, and now his cattle grazed over as great an area as Murrel's Rafter M. The two were inseparable. Knowing at first he couldn't lick Murrel, Tony had offered the olive branch of friendship.

But now Graham might be ready for the split. If he made people think Murrel had smoked down John Clark for coming to his wedding, then Murrel would lose popularity. Graham was crafty that way.

Tony Graham wanted the small feed lots beneath the rim. There was still Newton Hart's Heart-Bar-Nine standing between, and then the Clark place. John Clark never doubted Graham's greed, never underestimated his ambition.

"It must be hard to think it'll be like this all through your life," the girl said, noting the way he'd drawn the blinds, the way he acted.

CLARK looked up sharply.

It was as though she had slapped him when he wasn't looking. He grinned a little when he found her eyes on him. They were round and warm and he caught a flavor here that he liked.

She was new here, a traveler. She was slim and willowy, but the velvet jacket she wore couldn't conceal the full, rich swell of her breasts. Her hat was saucy; a bonnet with a silly feather. Her face held a loveliness he couldn't deny. An April flush, he told himself. September would wipe the enthusiasm from her cheeks.

He said, "Life, ma'am, ain't always cream and honey."

"Isn't it, though?" She let her saucy look stay on him.

Her eyes got into him and he squirmed on the hard upholstery. What did you answer a woman like this?

Then she took pity and smiled on him. "I've always believed life was pretty much what you made it."

"Maybe," he said. He discovered he was staring at the dusty outline of his boots, and he felt awkward, hands pushed into his holster belt. He went a little further in his admission. "Maybe it is, ma'am. I always figured on that too."

She laughed. "My brother was a good bit like you, I think. Always searching for the right side to fight for. He was too ready to fight, I'm afraid. He's not living any more."

There wasn't so much lightness in her face now. He said politely, "That's too bad, ma'am."

"But he could have made his life quite different. It is what we make it," she said.

They sat and looked a little longer. And then she told him more gravely, "I saw your saddle there in the lantern light. You have dangerous enemies, haven't you? I can see it on your face. Is it so serious in this Cimarron country?"

His lips broke into their hollow smile while he said, "They're trying to stop me from going to town. It might have been my own wedding night."

He found himself telling things he never thought he would betray. Perhaps because he was edgy, and this could have been his night, and she was a woman, sweet and clean and young. There was no feeling at all for Claire. Thus far he didn't even know the feeling of relief, that he had escaped a lifetime that would have become unbearable.

Then, when he was finished, he said something purely subconsciously. He didn't want her thinking he was one of the cow barons. "I only own a small outfit. Two-three hundred head over on the bench. But they're fine stock. Built the house myself."

"Does it make you happy? I mean, even though it's small?"

He looked up quickly. "Sure does, ma'am."

"That's all that matters. Sections—cattle—what does it all amount to if it can't buy you peace?"

"That's the way I figure. Though I couldn't put it near that pretty." Actually, he felt a glow inside. This woman held a deep wisdom. He wondered how she could understand so completely. He wouldn't have expected much sense underneath that spooky hat.

"I'm Ann Channey," she said. "My father is a lawyer in Cimarron City."

John Clark felt the fingers at work in his stomach. Life had the damnedest way of cutting the deck, and he sensed what was coming. Her eyes were on him, her face hopeful, the pride running deep through her.

He wondered how long it had been since she had seen her father. The Channey he knew they called Judge Channey—a man who had slipped far. The Judge never went outside without his bottle.

Her voice was still in his ear. With the whisper of hope, the pride in her face.

She asked softly, "Did he ever become district attorney? The last Mother heard, his name was on the ballot."

"No," John said, "the Judge missed by a few votes."

He was slipping backward in time. It had been the year Tony Graham had smoked the nesters out of Ponil Canyon. The Judge was sympathetic with the nester

families and Graham's hand-picked man had whipped him at the poles. Graham ruled the country with a brassy hand and they had starved Channey, nagged and broken him. Now the Judge was a drone, a hack.

Probably the same intangible reasons that loosened John's tongue made her talk.

"Mother and Dad couldn't stick it out," she said quietly. "It's too bad people can't learn to get along together. We were brought up without knowing Father. Now Mother's dead, and I'm coming out to join my dad. I agree when you say life isn't always cream and honey."

Now he was beginning to understand the wisdom that lay behind Ann Channey's blue eyes. But he watched in silence.

"I'll find something to do. I'll teach for a while."

She said all this confidently. Hope was in her strong. He saw tragedy had left its mark on her, and he felt a moment's softness. But he was fundamentally a hard man and Claire had made him cynical. Other thoughts were crowding out his softness.

She might teach for a while, but it would be only a little while. Some man would drift along and court her and they would settle down to the meager frugality of housekeeping. After that, how long until September caught her?

He said simply, "You'll find the Judge in town. He's aged, and he don't have the practice he once had. You better not have your heart set on too much."

Her glance set him on edge instantly. "But I'll be here to help him now. I've never known what it was to have a father."

ONLY A handful of townfolk were waiting for the stage to pull up to the Carson House racks. The wedding took all the attention from the incoming coach. John Clark lifted the blinds and saw the yellow lamplight on their faces. He caught the gleam of interest in Ann Channey's eyes as she scanned the walk in front of the old adobe hotel.

You reach the top of a mountain and look out from the summit. A new view, all fresh and rosy in an unstained, clean light. A new life there in the next valley. Ann Channey had that kind of a look on her face. Her shoulders were straight. April never held a finer moment.

She was a rare girl and he was glad he had had this chance to know her. Somehow it had lifted some of the weight from his shoulders. Now he turned to catch the stare of Cimarron's sheriff.

Stash Selden was a solid, bulky man, his heavy brows giving him a sober look. You never knew what went on beneath Stash's cloudy brow. He was impartial until stirred, a man who weighed most things and held his peace justly. Now he watched the passengers step down, his face carved with hard lines.

John caught the mood of expectancy on the crowd. He climbed after his saddle, got it over his shoulder. He felt Stash's hand drop on his arm. He swung away and then looked into the worried face.

"You oughtn't to have come," Stash said. "What's on your mind, Johnny? I got to know."

John Clark frowned. Seeing him here, Cimarron expected the worst. The corner of his glance showed him Buckhorn lifting Ann's bags, taking them into the Carson House. She would be going in to wash away the dust before the meeting with her father.

He forgot all about Stash. It was too bad hope would be slashed by bitter disillusionment. Again he found himself condemning Tony Graham.

Stash's words drove in on him stubbornly. "Johnny, I'll have no fights. I want that straight."

He pulled away from Stash's grasp. "Why don't you wet-nurse Tony? The damn puppy who brings in the votes to pin on your badge!"

He saw Stash wince and then he turned down the block toward Hagar's livery barn. He saw Graham riders tramping through the end of town. A few Murrel riders with them. Already they were rowdy and drunk. One lifted a gun and shot out a post lamp. Before this night was out, Stash Selden would have his belly full.

The townfolk stared at John Clark openly. It was there in the faces. Men thought he had come here to break up this marriage of Dutch Murrel and Claire Ronson. They knew only one man could win her, and John Clark was one who did not yield what belonged to him.

But his heart inside was cold—to Claire, to the wedding, and to Murrel and whatever he did with the future. A faint whisper of thankfulness was already reaching him.

He entered the archway of Hagar's barn and found an empty on the saddle tree from which to hang his gear. At the back end he discovered a vague form. He yelled out, "Frank, I'll need a horse in a couple of hours."

Hagar came up quickly, his thin, nervous face pinched more than usual. "You mind your business, young fella. Murrel won't like this. And that Graham. He's like a snake in your pocket."

Damn it, were they all in this? John held his silence, studying Hagar. The old man said, "I always looked on you as a cowman with sense."

"I hope I still am, Frank," John said. He walked out, feeling the other's restlessness and not caring for it.

THE DUST from his spill was still over him and its throat-rasp finally took him to the Buffalo Bar. He wondered what Buff Corcoran would have to say.

He found the magnificent bar almost deserted and he gave his order to a white-coated bartender. He let his glance play over the length of the saloon.

At the rear sat Luke Huggins, one of the nesters Graham had smashed in the Ponil. The man was playing moodily with an empty glass. John nodded, and felt the other's friendly smile. Huggins was in his cups, and John felt an instant pity, knowing the other had never recovered after Graham smashed him.

This was the hall where he had met Claire. She had come here only a year ago as a singer. Cloying fingers of the past reached for him. Regret, some sadness interwoven with joy. Her black eyes had a way of touching a man. You didn't forget easily. Her full, round body intoxicated a man completely. She had been lush and warm, and for a time she had shared part of his life, even dreaming with him of the future.

Along the street of life every man makes his blunders, and John Clark winced mentally over his. In a way the Buffalo Bar had come between him and Claire. In a moment of joking Claire had wanted to know would he hold her singing in a saloon against her all her life. And he had replied he probably would.

He knew it was true. It would have mattered. He might be a six-cow rancher, but he knew now the woman he married wouldn't be pawed over by a whole county.

But it had been a hell of a thing to tell a girl. A quick-running shudder slid through him.

He heard the soft scuff of a dress boot and he lifted his glance. Buff Corcoran stood behind his polished counter. Buff's sorrel-colored hair was neatly plastered back, his thin mustache trim, his black tie strictly in the zenith of fashion. There was a whisper of concern in Corcoran's eyes.

"I knew you'd be in, Johnny," Buff said simply.

John frowned, staring into his untouched brandy. Years back, Buff had been his closest friend. They had gone to the country schoolhouse together until Buff moved back to town. Buff's grandfather had come into Cimarron before the Murrels and had cleaned the buffalo out of the basin. Buff's father had named him after the frontiersman, hoping he might develop characteristics of the old pioneer. But Buffalo Corcoran's talents h[illegible] run to swank bars.

John shook his head and said slowly, "It stands all right with me. If Claire prefers him, I'm damned if I want her."

A sigh touched Buff and the concern eased from his face. "It's good to hear you put it that straight." He let a moment run, his glance inviting John to take his brandy.

"I always thought how well off you were," Buff went on. "Still do. Me, Dutch Murrel, Tony Graham—you got something on us all. A little spread where you

don't have to take anybody's dirt. Small enough so you won't eat out your heart over interest payments. Spend your own time fishing and hunting in the timber. Nobody can take that away. I want you to know there ain't any of us got what you've got."

"I'm glad you say that. I've been happy. Maybe people thought I was lazy. I guess I'll still be."

"What the hell more can anybody ask?" They lifted their glasses together and downed their drinks. Buff's eyes still clutched John's, and he said with a sharpness coming into his voice, "Well, so much for the wedding. You hear about the other?"

"What was that?"

"Newt Hart's moving out. Graham's taking the place over. Puts the squeeze on you next."

John felt his chest tighten. He understood completely the shot that had searched him at the Rafter M fork. It signified the duplicity of Graham, his scheming, cunning mind. Had he been killed riding to town tonight, the finger of accusation would have pointed to Murrel. And Graham was getting ready to take it all now. Closing his fist over the ranges, squeezing even his friends.

This was what Graham had already done to Luke Huggins, to Ann Channey's father. And he was next.

His eyes picked up a gleam and flush stained his cheeks. He said solidly, "Nothing I like better than a good fight, Buff."

"That's the talk! I was you, I wouldn't take any part of Graham."

NOW THERE was movement at the swing doors. Corcoran's face ran a shade more sober and froze that way. In the mirror John saw the cowmen push into the hall. Murrel was leading them, dressed in his handsome wedding outfit, a smile biting across his soft face.

Glib-tongued Tony Graham came alongside. He was tall and wide shouldered and looked uncomfortable in the tightness of his broadcloth. For an instant as he recognized John Clark, surprise flicked across his deeply-set eyes. Then this vanished and he came on with Murrel.

The bridegroom walked straight to John Clark. One thing about Murrel, you knew where he stood.

He said frankly, "Johnny, how do you take it?"

The question caught him with brandy still between his fingers. He turned slowly, letting his full gaze strike Murrel.

"I wish you both well," he said. "I wish you luck, Dutchy. I think you're going to need it with Claire."

Murrel bit his lip uneasily. "That last isn't too friendly," he insisted.

"Look, I run my stuff on my own grass. You do the same. You make sure you brand your own calves, market your own beef. We'll get along like that."

Tony Graham came out with a sneering jibe. "How long you figure you'll own your own grass?"

John let his eyes slide, feeling the heat work up around his collar. He read the insolence of Graham's face, the iron will that had had its way with the others. He was thinking that Graham had come here with damned good stock. Too good, for a fella who never made much talk of his past. John wondered how many cholla trails Graham had been on?

Through the corner of his vision he picked out Huggins moving along behind these cowmen and he felt a restless moment. Then his gaze dropped to Graham's coat front. The second button seemed an ill-match with the others. A quick job had been done with the rent cloth. The faint odor of horses was still about Graham.

John's fingers toyed with the button he had picked up among the trail ruts. His fingernail ran around the ridges. He noted they were like the ridges on Graham's other buttons.

Graham laughed. "Heard Newt Hart sold out? When this is over I'll make you a proposition."

"You couldn't pay my price," John said simply.

"I pay what I think—"

John broke in, irritated, "Been to the tailor recently, Graham?" He watched an-

ger cross behind the other's sharp eyes. The temptation was too great and he let his glass tilt, pouring his brandy down Tony's waistband.

For one dead moment while the liquor seeped, a silence held. The barroom sensed this, and was aghast.

Then Graham let fly an oath and his hand slapped against his hip. He found no gun and he drew back his fist swiftly. That was the moment Huggins chose to strike from the rear. He grasped Graham's arm and held on tightly.

"Kill him, Mr. Clark," Huggins yelled. "You saw him try for a gun!"

The hollow smile faded on John's lips. It had been good to bait Graham. It had done something inside him. But he had not wanted this.

HE LUNGED at Graham, knowing Huggins stood at the brink of death. But he was too late. Graham broke loose and drove a blow into the nester's face. All the fury and hate and humiliation was in Graham's fist. The nester dropped to the planks like a dead duck.

Now John was on Graham. Anger was in him and he let fly a fist that caught the other along the side of his skull. It was a solid blow and Graham went down.

John's Colt was in his hand. His eyes swept the barroom. Murrel stood slack-jawed. Sight of his best man crumbled on the floor had stunned him. The Rafter M punchers were lined up solid against the wall and they made no move to hinder him. He bent and shouldered Huggins.

The nester was coming to when they reached the boardwalk. John stood him on his feet and held him a moment. "That was a fool thing to do."

Rubbing his jaw, Huggins said, "Why didn't you kill him, Mr. Clark?"

"I don't want to kill anybody," John said irritably.

"This morning," Huggins sobbed brokenly, "my wife died. I don't care what happens now."

John Clark was thoroughly sobered. The pattern of ruin had left its mark plainly on Huggins. The trampled crops, the torn fences, the burnt cabin. All this man had wanted was the right to a living. John felt a deep stirring. He was next on their list.

"I'm sorry," he said slowly. "Best thing you can do is find a horse and hit the trail. Stay out of Cimarron a while. When he comes to Graham will shoot you." He watched Luke Huggins stumble away beneath the galleries.

He spied Ann Channey hurrying along beside the long adobe wall of the Carson House. He strode hastily across the street and lifted the luggage case from her hand. "I'd be happy, Ann, if you'd let me."

Her eyes were dancing and John Clark caught himself fancying the whisper of spring in that look. He found himself marveling how fresh she was, how zestful. His eyes traveled the Sangre de Cristo peaks, soft in moonlight. They were all right in spring, he thought. A cowman might find his way. But with winter they were saw-toothed and ornery. They hung hoary and heavy with snow. Better beware.

His steps led her to the edge of town where an undeniable shabbiness came to the buildings. He saw Stash Selden slipping through the shadows. The sheriff's eyes stabbed across the road and he crept into an alley's niche and waited, watching.

Ann stumbled on the crooked walk and fell against the fence. The Judge's sun-rotted sign clattered onto the walk. She stood rubbing her arm while John hammered it back to its post with his fist. Her laugh was soft, nervous.

"I have found my father," she said. He nodded and led her up the walk.

A light burned in the parlor and John opened the door and stood aside while she entered. Surprise ran through him as he looked inside. He felt an uplift.

This ill-kept room had always shown the lack of a woman's care. Yet tonight Channey had tried to smother its dust, to atone for the years of inexcusable neglect. The bottles were missing, the furniture had been set with some eye to arrangement. This made it easier on Ann.

All at once it was clear to John. He had heard them say earlier in the week that the preacher had taken sick. The wedding party

must be on its way here for a civil ceremony!

Judge Channey came out in his frayed frock coat. He stopped cold in his tracks seeing John Clark. It was plain he had been expecting the others. A certain serenity had come to the Judge. His face seemed cameo-like in its pale modeling, lined about the mouth and eyes by age and worry. His gaze drifted to Ann.

These two looked deep into each other, hunting ground that was common. Some fundamental to begin from. With a frail cry Ann ran to his arms.

The Judge said, "Johnny, the wedding party will be here soon."

John understood. Anyway, he had no desire to see the wedding—or Claire. He was strangely calm and at peace. He turned and went into the night.

FOR A LONG while he was not sure what kept him in Cimarron. The block-wide Maxwell House was dull. Its game lagged. Swink's Gambling Hall was no better. Interest tonight was all on Murrel's wedding. The great cattleman who was taking home his saloon singer. Claire had let fly her rope and dallied a good one.

From the dingy Cattleman's Saloon he watched the wedding party arrive at Channey's. Then they departed amid clouds of paper and rice. The Rafter M cowhands banged long with their six-shooters.

Dutch's foreman had brought around the surrey, and Claire had looked lush as she stepped into it. John could look at her calmly now. She would always regard him as a six-cow rancher, a blundering, lazy failure. And he would think of her just as Dutch Murrel's wife, to put it politely. He knew now they had not been meant for each other. He was glad he had missed that rope.

Buckhorn came in from the Carson stage barn. He gave John a familiar back-slap. "It's over, Johnny. And you still ain't got nobody to rag you."

They had a drink on it. Afterwards, John tried a hand at cards. Stash Selden walked past on his rounds. His face was covered by its bleak mask.

And now John Clark began to sense what was happening to him. He found it hard to leave Cimarron because Ann Channey was here. The thought came like white light, leaving him utterly stilled. When fall came in for Ann it would find her unchanged. She would respect her man without counting his cattle.

John Clark would want his woman sharing his life, his hunting, his fishing. Ann Channey would be like that. She would let the years drop lightly over her shoulders.

He pushed from the shabby green table, the palms of his hands moist.

Outside a deep stillness held Cimarron. Vague smells of deep-fry potatoes drifted through the open door of an all-night hash house. It was the only thing that touched his sensibilities. He moved like a shadow over the rotting walk.

At the corner Stash Selden surprised him. "Go home, Johnny. Don't give me trouble."

He walked beyond, pulling his mind to concentration. Graham still wanted him out of the way. If he didn't watch out, a bullet would rip open his back.

Something else struck with the thought and he leaped against the blind wall of the apothecary's, hand sliding to his gun handle. The thunder clap of a shot still racketed through town. It clung to the night like a smothering shroud. All at once John Clark thought of Huggins. He leaped away from the wall and ran, following the shot.

The crash had come from a side street and John slowed, pulling his gun. He saw a vague shape slouched against a curbside barrel. It stirred as he drifted near. He heard his name spoken over the quiet street. "Mr. Clark, is that you?"

"Keep down!" John yelled. He ran now, his gun before him.

Huggins, apparently still in a sort of blind stupor, stepped away from his barrel. He was moving up to his horse when John saw a streamer of gunfire. The nester went down squealing in pain.

John felt lead pull through his jacket. He knew Graham was forted within the dark maw of an alley. That punch had been too much. The ways of a cholla-rider, a scrapper, were coming back over Graham.

He drifted closer to the alley, brushing the tenseness away from his belly. He caught the blinding fire of Graham's pistol and shoved his shot into that point-blank fire. A sledging blow caught him in the arm and half turned him about. But he kept walking, away from the alley. The sound of a pistol's clattering onto a plank reached him. He knew Tony Graham was dead.

He walked back to Huggins, a sickness clutching his belly. Stash Selden met him, relief breaking through the man's immobile face. "Graham is down," John told him. "Anything the law might like to say."

Stash said it faintly. "Thanks, Johnny." Then louder, "Get up and have Doc look you over."

"You better get Huggins to the doctor," John said. "His leg's shattered."

He walked on, the sickness still with him. People were gathering on the corner and they stared as he drifted on. He saw a familiar face moving halfway down the block. He became aware of someone grasping his arm.

He turned and found Judge Channey. "Better come to the house and let me pour you a brandy. Good for that weakness."

He heard Ann speak beside him. "Is it all finished now? All over?"

He nodded. "It's over, Ann."

"Then I'm glad!"

He moved beside them, sensing the power of her nearness. He had the feeling this would happen often, the three of them walking together. But not under these same circumstances. The Judge said again, "A glass of brandy will settle your nerves."

John Clark scarcely heard him. He was looking at Channey's daughter.

THE SAGA OF JACK WILLIAMS

THE BEST KNOWN NAMES in the territory of Nevada in the early 1860's were those belonging to the desperadoes who could handle the six-shooter with ease. Here is an item from the *Enterprise*, Virginia City's leading periodical:

***FATAL SHOOTING AFFRAY:* An affray occurred last evening in a billiard-saloon on C Street between Deputy Marshal Jack Williams and Wm. Brown, which resulted in the immediate death of the latter.**

Officer Geo. Birdsall, sworn, says: "I was told Wm. Brown was drunk and was looking for Jack Williams; I started for the parties to prevent a collision; went into the billiard-saloon; saw Billy Brown running around, saying if anybody had anything against him to show cause.

"Deputy Marshal Williams was at the end of the billiard-table near the bar; I moved closer to them, supposing there would be a fight; as Brown drew his pistol I caught hold of it; he had fired one shot at Williams; I wrenched the pistol from him; walked to the end of the billiard-table and told a party that I had Brown's pistol, and to stop shooting; Mr. Foster remarked that Brown was shot dead."

With a wee bit of imagination you can figure out that Marshal Jack Williams did the shooting. Now four months elapse:

***ROBBERY AND DESPERATE AFFRAY:* On Tuesday night, a German named Charles Hurtzal, engineer in a mill at Silver City, came to this place, visited a hurdy-gurdy house on B Street. He evidently had money, and was spending it freely. Late in the evening Jack Williams and Andy Blessington invited him downstairs to take a cup of coffee. Williams proposed a game of cards and went upstairs to procure a deck. On the stairway he met the German, and drawing his pistol knocked him down and rifled his pockets of seventy dollars. Hurtzal dared give no alarm, as he was told, with a pistol at his head, if he made any noise they would blow his brains out. Yesterday a warrant was issued, but the culprits had disappeared."**

Alas, now you see that Deputy Marshal Jack Williams is on the wrong side of the law. The inevitable happens five months later.

***SPECIAL FLASH:* Jack Williams killed while playing cards. Unknown man thrusts gun through crack in door. Williams dropped to floor riddled with balls.**

***P. S.* If it will make you any happier, there was a rumor that the killer of Williams himself was later killed.**

——*Harold Gluck*

a true story

by

D. L. McDonald

Spunky Nellie

— the Angel of Tombstone

Whenever a man needed help, Nellie was there

A CURIOUS combination of wanderlust and a passion for doing good drove pretty Nellie Cashman over most of the discovery trails of the West before a combination of circumstances forced her to settle down and expend years of her goodness upon Tombstone. Perhaps some inscrutable fate was behind it all. Certainly no town ever needed an angel more.

Nellie was born in Ireland, and came to

America while still in her teens. She and her sister lived first in Boston, but the adventurous Nellie was unhappy in the staid town, and in 1868 the two girls sailed to San Francisco. The older sister soon married a Mr. Cunningham and settled down in the town beside the Golden Gate. Alone, Nellie embarked upon the independent life that was to carry her to the mining camps of half the continent.

A woman of virtue and integrity, Nellie Cashman reasoned that lonely men would long for good home-cooked food, and for beds with smooth clean sheets, quite as much as for the other "comforts" that were available—for a price—at places like the notorious Bird Cage and its kind.

And so, from the Cassiar gold fields in northern British Columbia to the fabulous discoveries at Virginia City and Tucson, Nellie Cashman followed the cry of "Gold!"

At every new diggings, almost before the first sluice-box was rocking, Miss Nellie's beds were smoothed and ready and the good smell of her dried-apple pies drew hungry miners to whatever tent or shack served as her temporary home.

Though she associated mostly with men, tramping discovery trails with them and sharing all the hardships and privations of the road, her reputation was spotless.

"She was as clean and courageous as we remembered our own mothers," it was said. "And any town she ever lived in would have lynched in a minute a man who laid a disrespectful hand or a dirty tongue on Miss Nellie."

Nellie Cashman was a beautiful woman in her middle twenties when the Tombstone goldrush began. You won't find her name mentioned in the bawdy tales of Tombstone's bloody heyday, though her establishment at Fifth and Toughnut Streets was enshrined in the memory of Ed Scheifflin and John Clum and the other old-timers who were really there.

There was no hospital in town; part of the time there wasn't even a doctor. No matter. Nellie Cashman promptly took charge of the sick and injured. The homeless ones she put to bed in the Russ House, and tended them until they were on their feet again. Those down on their luck she fed and grubstaked. If they needed money, she found it.

"If Miss Nellie asked for a contribution, we all contributed," John Clum recalled. "If she had tickets to sell, we all bought tickets. If she needed actors for the kids' Christmas party or for an entertainment to raise money for someone down on his luck, we all turned actors. No one ever thought of turning Miss Nellie down."

SHORTLY after Nellie came to Tombstone in 1880, her sister's husband died. Nellie brought Mrs. Cunningham and her five children to Tombstone, settled them in the rambling adobe on Toughnut Street, and after her sister's death three years later she brought up the children as her own, educated them, and saw them all started in lives of their own.

It was this circumstance that made Nellie so peculiarly Tombstone's own. During the years her "family" was growing up, she could no longer move from place to place as new discoveries called.

How many tales are there of her charity? A hundred, two hundred, perhaps. This one is typical. An old prospector fell down the shaft of his claim and broke both legs. Nellie had the boys move him into a spare bed in her own parlor, the Russ House being full at the time.

Within a week she had raised more than $500 for him, and some of Tombstone's toughest characters were going around gesticulating and whispering to themselves as they learned their rôles for Miss Nellie's forthcoming Saturday night benefit—a performance that was guaranteed to cut materially into the take down at the Bird Cage that evening.

Don't get the idea that Nellie Cashman was of the school of meek womanly do-gooders, however. There was plenty of fire in the little Irish girl.

When the striking miners of the Grand Central Mine, in an ugly mood, decided to kidnap the superintendent and lynch him, it wasn't surprising that Nellie Cashman, who had been a ministering angel to the miners' hungry wives and children, should

have heard of the plot. Nor, knowing Miss Nellie, were the miners too surprised when she showed up in a hired livery rig and took the superintendent for a little ride, just a few hours before the kidnaping.

When the miners learned that he was already safely on the train bound for Tucson, they were philosophical. "I guess Miss Nellie wouldn't have let us hang him no how," they opined.

Miss Nellie took equally prompt action the night before the five men convicted of the Bisbee murders were executed. She visited the men and prayed for them.

Leaving the prison late at night, she discovered that a few local impresarios were erecting a grandstand just outside the courtyard and selling tickets to the forthcoming hanging for ten dollars apiece.

Nellie snugged her bonnet more firmly on her brow and hurried up to the mines. She got in touch with about thirty miners and suggested that they meet at her back door when they got off the night shift at 2:00 a.m. When they arrived, she led them behind the jail. "Down it comes, boys," she said.

Came the dawn there was not a sign left of the grandstand. Within the courtyard the executions proceeded decorously and with a decent privacy.

Since the sixth member of the gang, Johnny Heith, had been lynched right at the foot of Toughnut Street a few weeks earlier, there has often been speculation as to why Miss Nellie did not interfere with that grim affair. The truth is, she was at the time busy officiating at a difficult "birthing" in a miner's cabin three miles from town, and did not get back until Heith's body had been cut down.

At any rate, it is said she gave "the boys" the rough side of her Irish tongue, and it is known she assessed everyone in town, including the lynchers, for funds to send Heith's sweetheart, the pathetic little Emmy Mortimer, back to her home in the East.

IN THE late 1880's, Nellie Cashman's Chinese cook went home to pay his respects to the graves of his ancestors. While there, he had a native artist in Hong Kong paint a portrait of his mistress from a photograph he carried. It is supposed to be an excellent likeness, and if so, Nellie Cashman was well worth looking at.

Hers was a beautiful face, both strong and spiritual. There is sadness there as well, and perhaps behind that shadow lies the reason why one as lovely as she never married. In a land where women were always scarce, she must have had many opportunities, but no hint of a romance is ever associated with her name.

The time came, near the turn of the century, when Tombstone and her "family" no longer needed Nellie Cashman. But there were new gold camps, and hungry men, in Alaska and the Yukon. Once more, a graying Miss Nellie trudged discovery trails. Young men in Dawson and in Whitehorse and in a dozen other northern mining camps slept in her clean beds and ate her good dried-apple pies—and saw in her the remembered gentleness of the "good" women they'd left at home.

One of them once asked her why she had never married.

"Let be, let be," she murmured. "Sure, a happy love is not for every mortal. And, for my part, there's a grave back there in Tombstone that was filled too soon."

There were many young men's graves on Boot Hill back in Arizona. No one now remembers which held Nellie Cashman's dreams.

KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 62)

1. Texas.
2. 760 miles.
3. Hold it. Quit wagging it.
4. Alaska brown and grizzly bears are very similar.
5. Two.
6. A room where saddles and other riding gear are kept.
7. Logs floating in a river in flood.
8. Deer track is more pointed.
9. One variety of jackrabbits have tails mostly white, another variety tails mostly black.
10. It's "dew-claws" in these parts.

Squawman

By Giles A. Lutz

FERRIS FISHER stepped into the deeper shadows of the sycamore before he took the proffered bottle. He wasn't a drinking man, but a nip on a chilly evening went a long way in keeping the ache out of old bones.

Burl Anderson chuckled and said, "Wouldn't do to have some of the womenfolk see our sheriff drinking."

Ferris said testily, "How often do you see me, Burl?"

Behind him, the schoolhouse was ablaze

JOHNNY WAS too shy to court his gal, so the wily old Sheriff decided he'd give romance a hand

with lights, and the strains of a fiddle and guitar drifted to them.

Anderson reached for the bottle. "Well, I don't care who sees me take a drink."

Ferris snorted. He raised his voice and said, "You hear that, Mrs. Anderson?"

Anderson gave a startled gasp and jerked his head around. He scowled at Ferris and capped the bottle without drinking. "Now, you done spoiled it for me." He stalked indignantly towards the dance.

Ferris grinned after him. The warmth of the little nip was spreading through his stomach, and he felt a sense of well-being.

Watching, Ferris winced. He was suffering for Johnny

But it wouldn't do to stay out here too long and let the chill sweep away the warmth.

He started to move out of the shadows, then stopped as he saw two people come around the corner of the building.

He muttered to himself, "Well, what do you know about that? Johnny Cullins finally got up enough nerve to get Betsy Holden off by herself."

He settled himself back into the shadows and watched shamelessly.

Johnny Cullins looked older than twenty-one. Hard work did that to a man, hard work and a sense of responsibility. His clothing was plain but immaculately clean. He had big, dangling hands, and the moon lighted his serious, intent face.

Ferris shook his head in sympathy at the look on Johnny's face. All the longing in the world was there, and Ferris would bet his best hat Johnny had never put it into words.

His eyes swung to Betsy Holden. She was as pretty as a quail, the prettiest schoolteacher this town ever had. She was little, but she had a power in her that turned men helpless. All the single men in town were at her feet, and the married ones wished they could have been.

Her head tilted back to look up into Johnny's face. "Did you get me out here just to ask me for the next dance, Johnny?"

There it is, Johnny, Ferris thought exultantly. Look at her face, boy. He swore silently and wanted to yell at Johnny. Johnny was looking at the ground, helplessly twisting his hands.

He mumbled, "Betsy, you know I don't dance very well."

The smile remained on her face. She had a woman's patience and a woman's wisdom. She said softly, "Then why, Johnny?"

Ferris grinned. She would skillfully drag forth the words that should be leaping from Johnny's tongue.

Johnny made a false start, gulped and tried again. "Betsy—Betsy—"

Ferris winced. He was hurting for Johnny, hurting for him hard.

Betsy moved nearer. That should be all the bolstering any man needed.

BEFORE Johnny could speak again, a big man came around the corner of the schoolhouse. He topped Johnny in both height and weight, and his clothes were on the dandy side.

Dale Tibbets had money, he had a big ranch, and he had nerve when it came to women. He also had an arrogance that puckered Ferris.

Tibbets possessively took hold of Betsy's arm. He frowned at Johnny, then turned his back on him, effectively blocking him out.

He said, "Betsy, I've been looking for you. You promised me the next dance."

She opened her mouth to protest, and Ferris knew she had promised no such thing. She looked expectantly at Johnny. Johnny stared at the ground.

Ferris saw the anger crossing her face. Her eyes flashed and she said, "Let's go, Dale."

She looked back once before she entered the building. Johnny was the picture of woe and dejection.

Ferris came out of the shadows, his face angry. He said, "That hole in your head is showing."

At Johnny's startled look, he growled, "I saw and heard it all. She was waiting for you, and you stood here like a tongue-tied dummy. Then you let Tibbets walk off with her."

Johnny said bitterly, "She must have wanted to go."

Ferris snorted. "She's got her pride. She gave you an opportunity to speak up. You didn't leave her any other course."

Johnny popped his knuckles. "I can't help it," he mourned. "I want to say a million things to her, and every time I freeze up." The bitterness was back in his voice. "Why wouldn't she turn to Tibbets? He's got a ranch where I've got a section. What have I to offer her against what he can do?"

Ferris stared at him, his thoughts flashing back thirty years. He had been like Johnny, painfully shy. A girl had smiled at him in much the same manner Betsy had smiled at Johnny, and he had let the smile go by. Even after thirty years the memory still had the power to prick him.

He said earnestly, "You're going to lose her if you don't do something, boy."

Johnny said hopelessly, "What?"

Ferris yelled, "The next time you see him with her, walk up and bust him one. At least, that'll get her attention. It'll make her think you care enough to get mad."

Johnny's eyes were wide with surprise. "I couldn't hit him for that, Ferris. Maybe she prefers his company."

"Oh, Lord," Ferris moaned helplessly.

Johnny said despondently, "Guess I'll be moseying home." He glanced at Ferris, hesitated, then slowly moved away.

FERRIS scowled at the schoolhouse. The dance had lost its flavor for him, too. He wouldn't enjoy watching Betsy in Tibbets' arms any more than Johnny would.

His scowl deepened. Tibbets was an arrogant man, a man who didn't consider other people had rights. Ferris had had several minor run-ins with him. Tibbets had threateningly said the next election would change things.

Ferris swore softly and turned towards his office. The warmth of the nip was gone. He felt old and chilly.

He heard the low, mournful chanting coming from one of the cells in the rear of the building as he stepped into his office. His deputy looked up and grinned.

"Cow Runner," he said. "I got him locked up again."

"Drunk?" Ferris grunted.

"He was," Tate replied. "Lying right out in the middle of the street."

"He's a menace to traffic," Ferris said. "Some horse is going to trip over him and throw its rider."

Tate shook his head. "That old duck can find liquor when there ain't any."

The mournful chanting kept up, and Ferris shouted, "Shut up."

The chanting resumed after a small break. It had a low minor quality that rasped Ferris's nerves. He started toward the cells. He would give Cow Runner something to really howl about. He would—

He stopped short, a gleam coming into his eyes. He had an idea, a cockeyed idea. But if it didn't work, no one would ever know but him.

He moved back to the Indian's cell and looked coldly at him. Cow Runner was a wrinkled-skinned Comanche. He grinned ingratiatingly at Ferris through the bars.

Ferris said frozenly, "Cow Runner, man found dead with knife in his back. People think you do."

Terror flashed in Cow Runner's eyes. "No do," he said wildly. "No do."

"I think you did. People are talking about hanging you. I'm not going to get shot trying to protect you."

He stalked down the corridor. Behind him, he heard Cow Runner's anguished wailing. He chuckled. Maybe Cow Runner would sweat out some of the liquor.

He passed through the front office and said, "Tate, go on home. I'll take over for the rest of the night." He sighed inwardly. That would make a long grind out of this day.

He thought Johnny would still be in town. He was discounting Johnny's words that he was going home. Johnny didn't have the look of a man who could face loneliness.

HE FOUND Johnny in the Golden Hind, toying with a glass of whisky. The drink had been hardly touched. Ferris looked at Johnny's eyes. They were clear. That was Johnny's first drink. He took his arm and said, "I want to talk to you."

He led him outside and said, "I'm tired of arresting and feeding Cow Runner. I want you to help me scare him so bad he'll never come back. I told him he's suspected of murder, that he might be lynched, and he's sweating. You're going to help him break jail."

Some of the despondency left Johnny's eyes. He grinned. "I always did want to help someone bust out of jail."

In the office, Ferris handed Johnny his pistol. He moved down the corridor, Johnny holding the gun in his back.

Cow Runner's wailing grew louder at sight of Ferris. Johnny had to shout to make himself heard above it.

He yelled, "Cow Runner, I don't think you did it. I'm going to give you a chance to get away."

"Me go," Cow Runner screamed. "Me go."

"Unlock it," Johnny said, jabbing Ferris in the back.

Ferris swore as he unlocked the door. Cow Runner sidled past him, then broke into a run. He had some years on him, but he could still get up and go. Ferris was glad the front door was open. Cow Runner would have taken it with him.

They stood at the front door and watched the Indian until he was out of sight.

Ferris grinned. "He'll run clear out of the county. I won't be bothered with him any more."

Listlessly Johnny handed the gun back. The sparkle of the joke was gone from his eyes. He sighed heavily. "I'll be getting along, Ferris."

Ferris watched him plod down the street. Johnny Cullins would be back. He would be back for the dance next Saturday night just to look at her. It was a form of self-torture a lovesick man always inflicted upon himself.

He thought often of Johnny Cullins and Cow Runner during the following week. Indians were supposed never to forget a favor. Would it hold true in Cow Runner's case?

SATURDAY morning, Ferris rode out to the reservation. He tossed a coin to a naked six-year-old boy and asked where Cow Runner's tepee was. The wide-eyed boy pointed it out. As Ferris rode up to it, he saw a flash of buckskin-clad leg disappearing into it.

He reined up, covering his grin. A wrinkled squaw answered his demands with a shaking head. "Not here," she kept repeating.

"Cow Runner," Ferris yelled. "I know you're in there. Come out. I want to talk to you."

A beady-eyed crowd was gathering. Their silent staring wore on a man's nerves.

Ferris called hastily, "Cow Runner, it was all a mistake. It wasn't you."

He thought it wasn't going to be sufficient, but then the flap was pulled cautiously aside, and Cow Runner thrust out a wary face.

Ferris said, "It was just a bad mistake. I rode out to tell you not to worry about it any more."

Cow Runner crawled out, looked at the assembled crowd, then drew himself up to his tallest height. "Me not scared," he said with dignity.

Ferris grinned. "I was sure mad at that boy for helping you. But it's a good thing he did. If that crowd had got hold of you before they found out their mistake—" He shook his head.

Cow Runner's eyes flashed. "Him my friend. Good friend."

Ferris sighed. "I feel kind of sorry for him. He needs a wife. And he's too bashful to do anything about it."

He let that sink in for a moment.

Cow Runner said violently, "Me got wives."

Ferris said casually, "He should be in town about sundown." He lifted his hand in a wave, wheeled the horse and rode off.

He felt pretty elated as he rode back to town. Now all he needed was a little timing....

The evening sun was almost down, as Ferris leaned against a wagon in the middle of the block. He saw Dale Tibbets ride in, dressed in his finest. The man cut quite a figure. Tibbets ignored Ferris's wave, and Ferris scowled after him.

He waved to rider after rider as they poured into town. It was going to be a big night. He saw Betsy Holden and tipped his hat to her. He grew worried as time passed. Where was Johnny Cullins—and where was Cow Runner?

He saw Johnny plodding down the walk, his shoulders drooping. That boy needed to learn to walk tall. He had low-rated himself so much that he had gotten into the habit of slinking. That was never going to catch any woman's attention.

Ferris called to him, and Johnny crossed the street. His face reddened, and his eyes wouldn't meet Ferris's. "Ran out of supplies," he muttered. "I'm going right back."

"Stick around. It's going to be a big night."

Johnny shook his head, but he did not move on. He talked to Ferris, and Ferris grew tight and nervous inside. He had been crazy to think he could depend on Cow Runner. Maybe the Indian hadn't even gotten the idea.

He looked over Johnny's shoulder and saw Tibbets and Betsy approaching. Her hand rested on Tibbets's arm, and she smiled up into his face. Ferris's heart sank. When Johnny saw that, he would tuck his tail between his legs and slink away.

Johnny was looking in the opposite direction. He said, "We didn't scare Cow Runner too much. Look!"

FERRIS whirled and saw Cow Runner moving with great dignity down the center of the street. Behind him plodded five squaws. Ferris let out a long sigh of relief, then stepped unobtrusively out of the picture.

Cow Runner's face lighted as he saw Johnny. He bounded forward and threw his arms around him.

"You my friend," he said happily. "Me do something for you. You need wife." He swept an arm at the squaws who were solemnly staring at them. "You pick any two."

Johnny's face was hot. Slowly he backed away. "You're—you're crazy," he stammered. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Tibbets and Betsy had stopped. Tibbets was grinning, and Betsy stared in fixed fascination. Other people drifted to the spot, drawn by the commotion.

Cow Runner looked at Ferris. Ferris grinned and made a motion that said, make him accept. Cow Runner caught it and turned to the squaws. He barked something in Comanche. The women surged forward and surrounded Johnny. They picked and pulled at him, laughing and chattering.

Johnny was wild-eyed as he glanced imploringly around. He saw nothing but grining faces. A sleeve of his shirt went to an eagerly grabbing squaw, and his shirt-tail was pulled out.

He beat at clutching hands and started around the wagon. He moved slowly at first, then broke into a run. The crowd ringed the wagon, and the only place he could run was around it. The squaws enjoyed the game. They followed at his heels like a pack of yapping dogs.

Johnny made two circuits, then two of the squaws reversed themselves and cornered him from the opposite direction. Johnny's eyes were those of a trapped animal. The other squaws were coming around the wagon at him, and laughing men kept him from breaking down the street.

His breathing was a sob in his throat as he sprang up onto the wagon box. He snatched the blacksnake whip, lying on the seat, and cracked the lash in front of the squaws' faces, his actions frantic.

The snapping tip of the whip kept the squaws at a respectable distance, and Cow Runner looked questioningly at Ferris.

Ferris could not make himself heard over the crowd's hilarity. Men hung onto each other, gasping for breath, tears from their laughter streaming down their cheeks. Tibbets's head was thrown back, his guffaws coming loud and strong. Betsy wasn't laughing. That fixed fascination still held her.

Ferris yelled in Cow Runner's ear, "I guess I was wrong. Take them away."

Cow Runner looked sadly at Johnny, then barked at his wives. They quit trying to climb up on the wagon and pulled back. No sunset was ever as red as Johnny's face. He stood on the seat, his chest heaving, his eyes still wild.

TIBBETS stepped forward, just as Ferris would have bet he would. Tibbets would never lose an opportunity to grab the stage. He held up his arm and said in a falsetto voice, "Can I help you down, Squawman?"

Johnny's eyes glittered like ice. He said, his voice shaking, "Don't say that again."

Tibbets roared with laughter. "Squawman—"

Johnny hit the ground in a long leap. His fist was swinging before his feet were solidly planted. He hit Tibbets on the nose,

knocking him backwards. The press of the crowd kept Tibbets from going down. He shook his head, and drops of blood flew. He swore, then plunged forward. Ferris heard Betsy's little scream.

Some of the crowd looked questioningly at Ferris, and he shook his head. This was one fight he wasn't going to stop.

Tibbets swarmed all over Johnny. He had more weight and he had more skill. He cruelly punished Johnny, and Ferris had his doubts. Maybe sheer anger wasn't going to be enough.

Ferris underestimated that anger. Johnny bled at the nose and mouth, but the wild light was still in his eyes. He kept throwing punches, though most of them were ineffectual. A looping right hand sent Johnny down on his shoulder blades. He lay there, his eyes glassy. Then slowly, painfully, he started pulling himself up. He was on his knees when Tibbets kicked at his face.

Ferris heard Betsy scream again. Maybe he should stop it now. The dirt in Tibbets was coming out. This could get nasty.

Johnny threw up an arm and blocked the swinging boot. The other hand clamped on the boot-heel, and he jerked hard. Tibbets's foot went out from under him, and dust puffed up as his shoulders banged into the street. Johnny heaved to his feet and stood there reeling. His fists were still clenched, and the glitter was still in his eyes.

The fall had shaken Tibbets. It took him some time to get his feet under him, and his face wasn't quite as determined. Johnny rushed him, even though his feet were heavy. A fist broke through Tibbets's arms and slammed against his cheek bone, tearing a gasp from him.

Johnny swarmed him, slamming home blow after blow. The storm was too great for Tibbets to stand and face. He pulled back, and his eyes swung wildly about, looking for an opening in the crowd.

Ferris nodded complacently. The man was whipped, even though he wasn't down. Even as Ferris thought it, Johnny hammered a blow against Tibbets's chin. Tibbets's mouth flew open, and he went down. He lay on his back in the dust, not out, for his eyes were open. He made little whimpering sounds, and the will to get up was gone.

Johnny's arms hung at his side, and he gulped in great draughts of air. Blood leaked across his chin and dropped down onto his shirt. He didn't look shy any more. He looked tough and competent.

BETSY moved toward him, her eyes wide and wondering. "Johnny," she said, her voice little more than a whisper. "You're hurt." She dabbed at his face with an ineffectual bit of handkerchief.

Johnny's eyes bored into hers. "You're going to the dance with me tonight. And you're not dancing with anyone else."

For an instant, rebellion flickered in Betsy's eyes. Then she nodded meekly. She looked up at Johnny through her eyelashes and asked, "Johnny, did you think a couple of those squaws were pretty?"

He stared at her puzzledly. "I didn't notice," he snapped.

Her face filled with satisfaction, she took his arm, and they moved away.

Ferris watched them go, his eyes a little misty. He turned his head and yelled at the crowd to break it up. He watched scowlingly until they slowly started away. A happy satisfaction was on his face as he walked toward his office.

It hadn't been so hard. All he'd had to do was get the right people into a pot and stir it up a little. If there was one thing that would make a man fighting mad, it was ridicule before the woman he loved. And if there was one thing that awakened a woman's interest, it was competition.

He sighed wistfully. He wished someone had done as much for him thirty years ago.

Read Our Companion Magazines of Romance

THRILLING LOVE • EXCITING LOVE • POPULAR LOVE

Now on Sale at All Newsstands—Each 25c Per Copy

WHOM SHALL I MARRY?

by Professor MARCUS MARI

MAN OF LEO
July 23 to Aug. 22

BOTH the states of Colorado and Missouri were admitted to the Federal Union under the royal sign of Leo—Colorado being admitted on August 1, 1876, and Missouri on August 10, 1821.

The man of Leo is every bit as colorful and vigorous as the two states which entered the Union under his sign. The fact that he was born under the sign of the Lion makes him inherently masterful, but confidence in his strength often makes him gentle and kindly, so that his is a protective, shielding attitude toward those he loves.

The Leo man likes to come between adversity and his loved ones. He tries to stand as a shield against the harshest assaults of life. This trait frequently makes him appear too domineering for those whom he would shelter. Though convinced that his actions are for the good of others, he must always keep in mind the bitter fact that experience is the best teacher.

No matter how much responsibility the man of Leo is tempted to shoulder, he must always bear in mind that they are best helped who help themselves.

Leo men must be especially careful to control their tempers. Supremely self-confident, they may be impatient with the shortcomings of others. The Leo man must be on guard lest his will power and determination be mistaken for vain egotism.

Possessing such strong and powerful personality traits, the son of Leo must be a master of self-discipline if he would gain popularity as well as prominence.

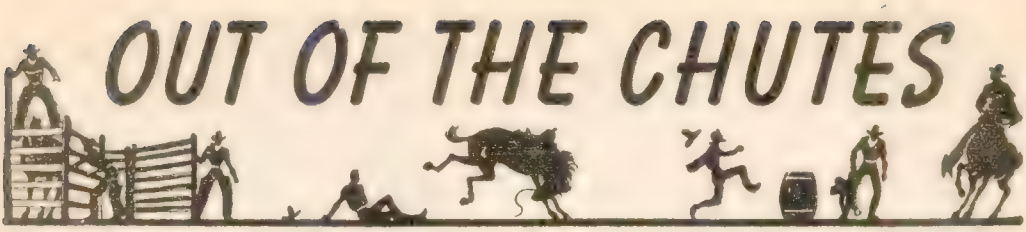
You may receive a personal reading by sending this coupon to Professor Mari in care of Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. ENCLOSE STAMPED AND SELF-ADDRESSED ENVELOPE. (Canadians enclose three cents instead of stamp.)

Name..... Sex.....

Address .....

.....

Exact date of birth: Year.....Month.....Date of Month.....8-15-52



COLD WEATHER at the Phoenix, Ariz., show didn't discourage anybody as far as we could see. The stands were full of customers, the entry list was crammed with the names of 345 top-hands, and the Beutler Bros. stock was just about as tough as possible.

The three brothers team of Beutlers has produced three of the top-notch Southwestern rodeos this year—El Paso, Tucson and Phoenix. Rodeo committees and spectators alike have been pleased with the quality of their stock and the pace of their shows. Lynn Beutler serves as managing director, Jake is livestock superintendent and Elra is chutes boss, and they really keep things moving.

At Phoenix there were ten or twelve contestants in each event, plus six contract acts and a cutting horse contest, and yet the show never quite took three hours to get through. One top-hand in the dirt seemed to be the cue for the next one to hurtle out of the chute. Maybe one reason the show went so fast is because so many contestants had their rides cut short by the Beutlers' broncs.

When you see a Beutler show, keep your eye out for a new bucker, Lone Star, for whom we predict unappreciated fame among the riders. He has a nasty habit of suddenly coming apart at the seams. His legs seem to fly off in all directions, and you're surprised when he lands all in one piece.

The Beutlers also like Upside Down, who almost got in that position to shake off Chuck Sheppard. Another new bronc is a dun mare called Mickey. She gave Buster Ivory some trouble, just enough so he made a fine ride. Winner of the event was the national champ, Casey Tibbs, who turned in his usual showy and expert performance. Buster came in second and Bill Ward was third.

Casey got off to a pretty good start this year, but until recently it looked as though the points he has piled up wouldn't do him much good in the standings for 1952. He expected to finish up the year in an army uniform. Recently, however, Casey reported to the induction center at Sioux Falls in his native South Dakota, and the army doctors turned him right back to rodeoing. One of Casey's knees has been banged up several times, and it's in such tough shape that the medics found evidence of seven separate fractures. All of these, of course, have healed by now (as much as they ever will) and though the knee isn't sound enough to be covered in khaki it's apparently strong enough to keep him aboard the broncs.

THE BAREBACK winners at Phoenix were Buck Abbott, Harry Tompkins and Wallace Brooks, and in calf-roping the champs were Toots Mansfield and Buzz Dolan, who split first and second place, while Ross Dollarhide came in third.

Conditions were especially tough on the ropers since there was a stiff breeze blowing right into their faces, which made their loops practically unmanageable. Announcer Cy Taillon got a big laugh from the crowd when he described one roper's loop as "a wet noodle."

There was a team-roping event at Phoenix, too, which was won by Asbury Schell and Joe Bassett with the excellent time (under the circumstances) of 58.8 seconds on three steers, some 5 seconds better than Jim Brister and Jim Hudson who came in second. But they beat out the third place team, Vern Castro and Clay Carr, by nearly 20 seconds.

The bull-riding event ended up with the bulls the clear winners. Even though they were somewhat handicapped by the deep sand in the arena, they bucked off more than half the cowboys who rode them. Todd Whatley won it and Wag Blessing was second. It seemed to us that Todd's name had been on a lot of winners lists this year, so we looked up his standing in the RCA magazine, *Buckboard*, and sure enough he's in first place for All-Around Champion and in third place in bareback riding and bulldogging. Maybe his bull-riding victory at Phoenix will put him near the top in that event too.

Bulldogging honors went to Homer Pettigrew, Harley May and Bud Linderman in that order.

One of the hits of the show was the Boomtown Quadrille, a fine group of young riders. The audience enjoyed their skill, but as usual got more kick out of their mishaps. In one performance two of the horses slipped and fell on a muddy spot in the arena. Both riders, a girl and a boy, calmly picked themselves up, mounted, and got quickly back into the routine, as the spectators cheered.

RODEO fans will be sorry to hear about the retirement of Clyde Miller after 25 years as a rodeo producer. Clyde, incidentally, is no relation to the Millers who produced the 101 Wild West Show and about whom we wrote a few months back.

He and his wife, Belle, got their start as performers. They had a string of high-schooled horses with which they appeared at fairs, horse shows and rodeos. A few years of this convinced them that there was more money to be had producing shows than performing in them.

Even after they organized their own show, though, they never lost interest in their trained horse act, and continued to train and exhibit dressage horses.

One of the reasons for the success of the Miller Ranch Rodeo was that it was a family affair. Their three children, Maxine, Bill and Maynard, all had jobs to do. Maxine followed in her parents' footsteps by training and showing horses. The man she married was a trick rider, and when Buck and Anne, the third generation, arrived, they went into the show, too.

Bill, until a few years ago, used to announce the Miller show, and his son, Mark, joined his cousins in the ring. Maynard was pick-up man, as well as doing all the odd jobs behind the chutes, like handling the stock. On occasion he could double as a trick rider.

Bill was the first to leave the family enterprise, but he had an excellent reason. He wanted to study for the ministry, and he is at present enrolled in divinity school.

The Millers carried on without him, and had even contracted for several shows this year when they decided to sell out. Their entire string of rodeo stock and all their equipment has been purchased by George Stichka of Seneca, Nebr., who will add the shows Clyde Miller had planned to produce to his own schedule.

Stichka has made an enviable reputation in the three years he's been in rodeo, and his new acquisition makes him one of the biggest producers in the Midwest. He got 100 head of bucking stock from Miller, plus 40 Brahma bulls, and also all the pick-up, parade and trick horses used in the Miller shows. And realizing the value of know-how, Stichka invited Tex England, arena director of the Miller shows, to join his organization. Rodeo committees who had signed up with Clyde Miller need have no fears about the quality of the shows they'll get instead.

As for Belle and Clyde Miller, they think that a quarter of a century of the hectic business of producing rodeos is enough. From now on they're going to settle down on their 3,000 acres at Rich Hill, Mo., and concentrate on cattle raising. We have a hunch, though, that they're going to miss all those educated horses they were so familiar with. Probably, any one of these fine sunny summer days, you could go out to Rich Hill and see Belle and Clyde busily schooling a colt.

Adios,

THE EDITORS

Sheep Heiress

By Frank C. Robertson

The story so far: In need of money for his ranch, BURR CHANDLER is turned down for a loan by CLAUDE PICKARD, bank manager. Pickard, Burr finds, is in partnership with VERNE HULL, Eustace ranch manager, to buy out the tremendous sheep ranch from lovely DALE EUSTACE. When Burr visits LEONA, once his fiancée, now Pickard's wife, she says she still loves Burr, but can't help him because her husband, whom she hates, has control of her money. She also tells him that the LEATHERWOODS—GEORGE, DICK and ANNIE—are dickering to sell out to Pickard and Hull. Since the Leatherwoods are the only other big cattle ranchers, their selling will bring sheep onto their common range and ruin Burr.

Later, George tells Burr that he has to sell or Pickard and Hull will blackmail Dick into jail. Burr finally talks George into seeing Dale, who offers him a fair price for his ranch. George tells Pickard and Hull that he won't take less than Dale's offer, $35,000. And Pickard and Hull know they have to do something drastic—fast!

PART TWO

BURR COULD get his eyes open in the morning, but he could scarcely recognize himself when he looked into the mirror. He might have won the

fight, he thought, but he had certainly gotten the worst of the encounter.

All he wanted was to get his horse and get out of town as quickly as he could. He didn't even intend to wait for breakfast, even though he had overslept, after finally getting to sleep, and he was hungry.

He was about to leave the room when there was a knock on his door. Supposing it to be Posey Mitchell, he called, "Come in." It was Leona.

She closed the door behind her, and said, "Poor Burr."

He backed away a few steps, as if afraid that she was going to come too close to him.

"I wish you hadn't come here," he said. "A nice scandal if your husband should happen to find out. And I don't need your sympathy."

"I'm aware of that, and I don't care if my husband does find out. I'm free to do as I please."

"Why did you come?"

"I wanted to. I saw George Leatherwood a while ago. He's waiting to ride home with you."

Burr wasn't sure that he wanted his neighbor's company, so he said nothing.

"George saw Claude in the bank this morning. I don't think he has sold out yet."

"Why should he when Miss Eustace will pay him twice as much."

Her eyes widened. "You've seen Dale Eustace?"

"A couple times."

"How do you like her?" she asked, eyeing him narrowly.

"Hadn't thought about it one way or another. She seems pleasant enough, for a sheep heiress."

"I don't like her," Leona said frankly. "We had her to dinner the other evening, at Claude's insistence."

Burr managed a grin. "I imagine little Leona was sort of left out of things."

"I was. Still, in all fairness, it wasn't Miss Eustace's fault. Claude was sickening."

"I wanted to say that it was nice of you and the other kids to offer to lend me money," Burr said. "I know you promoted the idea, but I can't take it."

"That's why I'm here. I knew you'd refuse it, and I want you to change your mind. After all, we do have a sentimental attachment to the ranch, and we don't want to see it become a sheep ranch."

"Your money wouldn't save me, and I simply couldn't take it," he said flatly.

SOMEONE knocked on the door just then, and they looked at each other, startled. A hint of fear crept into Leona's eyes. There was no place for her to hide, had she wanted to, and it was known that Burr was in his room.

Burr stepped over to the door and opened it, expecting to see either George Leatherwood or Claude Pickard. Dale Eustace stood there.

"Come in," he said.

"Oh! You have company," Dale said. "I won't intrude."

"I was just leaving," Leona said quickly. "Good-by, Burr." They listened to the quick clicking of her heels down the hallway.

Burr offered the only chair in the room, and when Dale took it he seated himself on the bed.

She said, "I heard about your fight with Verne Hull. Isn't that a rather childish thing for grown men to do?"

"I suppose."

"Your poor face," she said compassionately.

"Not very lovely to look at, I'm afraid."

She seemed able to look at it without any trouble at all, although he wished she wouldn't. She said, "I hear you jolted our friend Claude Pickard. Was the fight over his wife?"

"You've been listening to gossip. Leona had nothing to do with it," he said.

"I just wondered. I heard that you two had once been engaged, and finding her here this morning—" She was smiling, and the flash of anger he felt faded.

This girl was reputedly a millionairess, and here she was sitting on a hard-bottomed chair in a cheap country hotel. Burr didn't know what to make of it.

Since she represented sheep, and it was her money that was going to break him, he thought that he should dislike her heartily, but he didn't. He had met her father a number of times, and though they had been potential enemies he hadn't disliked him. Old J.P., as the countryside knew him, had been a blunt, driving man who fought for what he wanted, but one always knew where he stood with him. Burr had a notion the daughter was the same way.

She said, "You got me interested in the Leatherwood deal. If you're going out there I wondered if you would let me go along, and tell me something about the cattle business."

"Why should you be interested in the cattle business?" he blurted.

Her answer took his breath away. "I see no reason why I should stick exclusively to sheep, and if the place is better suited to cattle than sheep, then I may continue to run cattle—if I should buy it. Besides, it might help promote better public relations."

If this happened, it would change everything, but Burr didn't dare let himself really hope that it could. If she should go into cattle he could sell her the J Bar K, no doubt, and have something left after he paid his debts.

He had a little difficulty speaking calmly, as he said, "That would be fine, and it would save a lot of mighty fine people from going broke. But I'm here on horseback, and that would be a long, hard ride for you to make."

"I'm used to riding," she said. "When will you be ready to start?"

"Just as soon as I get breakfast, and find George Leatherwood," he said eagerly. He was perfectly willing now to face the stares of the curious in the dining room.

"I'll be waiting," Dale said.

THE MORE time Dale spent at the Seventy ranch the more puzzled she became. She had taken at once to Annie Leatherwood, and in two hours they were fast friends. Dale liked the older woman's outspokenness. Annie had no use for sheep, and didn't mind saying so, but Dale didn't take offense. She was content to explain the economics of the wool industry to Annie and let it go at that.

Reluctantly Annie admitted, "Well, I guess we've got to have wool if we ain't to go nekkid like savages. But I still say I'd rather have a good beefsteak any day than a mutton chop."

Dale laughed.

She had met Dick Leatherwood, and catalogued him at once as a spoiled, conceited, smart-aleck. He was trying to flirt with her before she had been in the house very long. George puzzled her. He wanted to sell, but in his talks he invariably pointed out the bad things of the ranch, and neglected the good.

After three days on the ranch she expressed a wish to look over the range. She had seen nothing of Burr Chandler since he had turned off at his own ranch, the day they had come from Chub Springs, and she had been hoping he would show her the range.

George professed himself busy, and Dick volunteered to show her around. There being no one else available she reluctantly agreed. Most of the day he spent telling her about his own accomplishments, and trying to make her believe that he was a man of the world. No stranger to a range, Dale kept her eyes open, and by the time she returned she had a pretty definite idea of the possibilities.

"Just what do you and your brother intend to do if you sell out?" she asked Dick.

"Oh, I don't know," he said carelessly. "George wants to retire, but I think I may buy a saloon in Chub Springs."

"Do you know what I think?" she asked.

"No. What do you think?"

"I think that any man who would give up ranching on a fine spread like the Seventy to become a saloonkeeper is either lazy or a fool."

Dick colored, and for once had nothing to say.

That evening after they had eaten supper, Dale said, "I've made up my mind. I'll give you forty thousand cash for your ranch, and buy your cattle at the market price."

There was a minute of stunned silence. "Don't you want to sell?" she asked. You said that was your price."

"Sure. Sure we want to sell," George answered. "But there's something in the way. You see, Claude Pickard and Verne Hull have a—a sort of option, and I feel obligated—"

"How much are they offering you?"

"I—I ain't at liberty to say, but it's considerably less. Still—"

"You might have told me that before I wasted my time," she said crisply.

Annie burst out, "They offered only ten thousand."

"Annie, keep out of this," George ordered desperately. "I can get more than that."

"Well, if you want to sell to them, there's no more to be said," Dale told them. "If you don't mind I think I'll go to my room. I'll be leaving tomorrow."

She was angry at first, but her anger faded as she thought it over. There was something wrong here. It didn't make sense that they would turn down the offer she had made for one less than half as much, and she had no illusions about Hull and Pickard. Both of them were strictly for themselves. She made up her mind to someway get to the bottom of this business.

SHE HAD her horse saddled immediately after breakfast. There had been almost no conversation at the table. Annie's eyes were red from weeping, and there had obviously been a family row.

Dale kissed Annie good-by when she left, and murmured, "I do hope you won't have to lose your home." Annie burst out crying and ran back into the house.

Dick was not around, but she had never seen a man look so unhappy as George.

She stopped at the J Bar K, and found Burr at home.

"On your way back?" he asked. "Did you buy the ranch?"

"I offered forty thousand, and would have paid more if they had asked it, but they refused to sell," she said. "I can't understand it. They're going to sell to my manager for a lot less."

She waited for him to say something, but he didn't.

"I thought you might be up to see me."

He grinned. "I'm still not proud of showing my face around. Besides, George ordered me to stay off his land, and the order hasn't been rescinded."

Dale leaned forward in the saddle, and said, "What's wrong there? What is the skeleton in the closet?"

"If they didn't choose to tell you I'm afraid I can't."

"And still, if Verne and Claude buy Seventy and turn it into a sheep ranch you'll go broke. That's true, isn't it?"

"I stand to go broke anyway."

"Why?"

"Because I happen to owe money that I can't pay."

"Isn't your credit good?"

"I thought it was, but I was turned down. Claude Pickard doesn't happen to like me."

"I can understand that," she said, and he knew she was thinking of Leona. "How much do you need?"

"Fourteen thousand."

"I'll be glad to lend it to you," she said quietly.

Burr stared. "You—lend me money?" he stammered.

"Is there any valid reason why you shouldn't take it? I'd expect security, of course, say a second, or chattel mortgage."

"It wouldn't do," he argued. "You're still in the sheep business. If you keep in it, and Verne Hull continues to run your outfit, there's bound to be trouble. You'd be backing the side you'd be fighting."

"Isn't the real reason that I'm a woman?" she demanded.

"It might be," Burr acknowledged. "But if Leatherwoods sell Seventy to Hull and Pickard, I'd be bound to go broke, and you'd lose your investment."

"That's a chance I'm perfectly willing to take," she said. "You think it over."

She turned her horse and rode away, a lovely, spirited girl, who had more business sense than Burr had given her credit for.

Burr scratched his head. After all, there

was no reason why he shouldn't accept a loan from her as well as anyone else. And if he got the money he would be in a position to fight for himself, and his neighbors as well, even though they were betrayed by the Leatherwoods. But he knew he wouldn't take it.

DALE RETURNED by way of Topaz, a small railroad and stock town, too small to boast a bank. She stopped long enough to talk to several businessmen, particularly Abe Dollenmeyer, who owned a store, saloon and livery stable. She pretended, although it really wasn't pretense, that she was interested in buying the Seventy ranch and going into the cattle business, but actually she was seeking information about Burr Chandler.

"A good cowman, Burr is, and honest as the day is long," Dollenmeyer gave his unqualified endorsement. He's in a tight now, and I only wish I had the money to lend him."

"Mr. Dollenmeyer," she said, "don't you think Topaz needs a bank?"

"Why, sure, but nobody here's got the money to start one."

Dale said, "I'm thinking of starting one myself—not openly, understand. I'd want my name kept entirely out of it. Do you suppose you could invest enough money so that you could legally become its first president?"

Dollenmeyer was flattered down to his boots. "I'll say I could," he declared. "And it would be a big thing for Topaz. A lot of the trade that goes to Chub Springs because they have to bank with old Jacques Duclos would stop here."

Dale said, "I'll see my attorney, and have him get busy on it right away. But, understand, my name is not to be mentioned. It will just be you and unnamed associates."

She thought, if Burr Chandler won't accept a loan from me one way, he may another.

She returned to Chub Springs too late to see anyone that night, but in the morning she came down to the big barn which had been the center of J. P. Eustace's operations. There he had maintained an office for a number of years, with an aging bookkeeper, Ivan Butts, who kept the firm's records, and forwarded regular reports to the home office in Chicago.

Beyond Butt's office was another expensively furnished room with deep, comfortable leather chairs and a mahogany desk. This room had been J. P.'s private office, although for some time it had been gathering dust.

Butts, a round-faced little man who was a genius at figures, greeted her almost fawningly. "It's good to see a Eustace here again," he said, "although I guess I won't be here for very much longer myself."

"Why is that?" Dale asked, looking at him.

"Well, Verne says him and Pickard are buying you out, and they won't want an old pelican like me hanging around. He as much as told me so."

"Well, just don't be too sure they're going to buy me out, and if they do, don't worry. I'll see that an old and faithful employee and friend of my father's as you have been is provided for."

"Thank you, Miss Eustace," he said humbly. "Thank you."

"Help me dust up in here, will you?" she requested. "From now on this is going to be my office."

The room was cleaned up in a matter of minutes, and Dale stepped to the telephone on the wall, and gave the crank a turn. Telephones had not been installed very long in Chub Springs, and the service was not rapid. Presently she got Jack Talcomb at the bank, and then she was put through to Claude Pickard.

"Oh, yes, Dale," he said. "Glad to know you're back in town. I wanted to see you."

"I'm at my office at the barn," she replied. "Could you come over as soon as you can get away?"

"At—your office?" His tone expressed disbelief, and some concern. If she was opening an office it looked bad for his prospects.

"That's right. My father's old office," she said.

UNDOUBTEDLY she was feeling some of her father's fighting blood coursing through her veins as she hung the receiver back on the hook. Pickard appeared so quickly that she knew he must have left the bank at once.

"Very comfortable," he commented, when she asked him to have a seat. "I hope it's only temporary."

She didn't respond to his intended witticism. "I think it'll be quite permanent," she said.

"You don't mean that you're thinking of going back on our bargain."

"I didn't know that we had made any bargain," she said coldly.

"Well, we were at least bargaining. If you hadn't contemplated selling out I don't believe you would have wasted our time, and yours."

"No agreement was reached," she said flatly, "and I told you I might not sell at all. I have decided now that I won't."

Claude Pickard gulped. His chagrin and disappointment were easy to read.

"I'm afraid you're making a grave mistake," he said. "The sheep business is no job for a woman."

"I'm even thinking of going into the cattle business," she said calmly. "I may buy the Seventy ranch on Rock River."

"I have an option on that," he said, no longer attempting to be light and airy. "Leatherwood has to sell to me."

"Would you mind saying for how much?"

I would mind."

"In the vicinity of ten thousand dollars, would you say? I'll go as high as forty thousand."

Dale looked at him contemplatively as he remained silent. Here, she was thinking, is a dangerous and ugly opponent.

"Blackmail can be a dangerous business, Mr. Pickard," she said.

"You are making unfounded accusations," he charged. "If you've been talking with that Chandler fellow—"

"I have not," she snapped, "but before you leave, here are a couple of facts to consider. If you don't pay Leatherwood as much as I have offered, which is forty thousand dollars, then it will be self-evident that blackmail of some kind is involved. I do a considerable amount of business with your bank, but I wouldn't care to continue if I knew the man in charge of it indulged in, shall we say, shady practices."

"Now, see here, Miss Eustace—"

"The second thing to remember when you are buying the Seventy ranch and trying to induce sheep on Rock River is that you will not have the support of the J. P. Eustace Company," Dale finished, unperturbed.

"Is that a threat, Miss Eustace?" he asked.

"Take it any way you wish," she replied. "I'll do all in my power to help those people save their cattle range, including lending Mr. Chandler the fourteen thousand dollars which you refused, knowing that he was a perfectly good risk."

She had the feeling that he would like to reach over and choke her.

"I will just state," he said with dignity, "that our offer for your sheep holdings still stands."

He went out, and Ivan Butts, who had heard every word, said, "This is really good news, but I am afraid—" He left the sentence hanging in the air.

CLAUDE PICKARD sent a messenger on a fast horse out to the sheep camp on Bullpen Creek where Verne Hull had his temporary headquarters, and before dark Hull was back in town, the two men closeted in Pickard's office in the bank. The building was closed, and no one else was inside.

Pickard broke the bad news in a hurry. "She won't sell out to us, she says we have to pay Leatherwood forty thousand, and she's going to lend money to Chandler," he summed up.

"If you had given Leatherwood his fifteen thousand like I said—" Hull began.

"We'll get that ranch for ten thousand," Pickard said. "We'll just have to be patient and wait a while."

"I see what you mean, but Dick will be wary."

"So will we. The fellow's a fool. This thing ain't going to be handed to use on a platter the way we thought. We've got to fight for it, and we're going to start right now."

"How?"

"The way I told you. I did a smart piece of business a while ago that cost us some money, but it'll be a good investment. I bought us a sheep inspector."

"I see."

"Not only that, I bought us a cowpuncher."

Hull looked his interest.

"Fellow named Lafe Hargood who works for the Seventy. Tomorrow we start getting busy."

"All right. But what about this Chandler fellow? If we don't get him out of there he can bid on the reservation lease the same as we do. And I've got a personal interest in him," Hull said.

"You should, after you fell for the oldest trick in the world and let him knock you out," Pickard jibed.

"Look who's talking? You were out cold. But that's the man I'm out to get, and I'm going to get him."

"I've got a lot more reason to hate him than you have," Pickard said, "but never let revenge count more than money. We're working on a deadline, but we can't afford to rush too much even so. Plan carefully, and carry out your plans—that's the way I made my success."

Frequently these two got on each other's nerves, and Hull was irked now by Pickard's calm air of superiority, but they were playing for high stakes, and each man knew he needed the other. Pickard was the planner, Hull the executioner.

DALE had scarcely entered her new office the next morning when Verne Hull appeared. "Oh, Verne," she said. "Did you just get in from the range?"

"Yes, I did," he replied. His eyes were bloodshot, from the effects of an all-night poker session.

"Bad news?" she queried.

"The worst. Scabies in the sheep."

"Oh, no!" Dale knew that scabies was the scourge of the sheep industry. "How bad?" she asked a moment later.

"I don't know. One herd has it bad, and there must be others," the manager said.

"But I thought all sheep were inspected coming up the trail."

"They were. A Basque outfit was held up and quarantined, but I found out later one of our herds had mixed with it a week or so earlier. Not only that, but this Basque had bothered us most of the winter. We got little bunches of his sheep at times, and he got some of ours. We had eleven desert herds, and so far as I know half of 'em may have been infected," Hull explained.

Dale said, "It seems to me somebody must have been pretty careless. What happens now?"

"I've already sent for Inspector Bywater. Any herd that he finds scab in will be quarantined on its present range. They'll have to be dipped three separate times, and kept where they are until all danger is past. That means they can't be taken to the summer range in the mountains. Dipping will cause a big lamb loss, and the wool won't bring much," the manager calmly enumerated the hazards.

Dale was feeling a strange weakness. If she stood up she was sure her legs would refuse to hold her weight. This, truly, was disaster.

She said, "I suppose there's nothing can be done till we see how bad it is."

"That's right, and Bywater may not get up here for a week, but it'll at least give us a chance to get the herds we think may be infected on the best range we can find for the summer."

Later, Dale was to wish that she had inquired further into that matter, but at the moment it appeared to make good sense.

As Hull was going out he paused to look back with a twisted grin, and say, "I'm only glad that you didn't sell to Claude and me before we found this out. It would have broke us."

And it wil break me, Dale thought. How complete the disaster might be she wouldn't know until the inspector made his report.

One thing stood out clearly in her mind.

It wouldn't be safe to put out any money on other projects until she knew how bad this was going to be. That meant that she must postpone starting a bank in Topaz, or lending money to Burr Chandler. And even if George Leatherwood came and offered to sell the Seventy she would have to back down on the deal.

It had dealt a body blow to her confidence in her ability to handle a big sheep outfit herself. She would have done better to sell as she at first had intended. And then she realized that she no longer had a possible purchaser. As Hull had intimated, he and Pickard would be fools to buy an outfit infected with scab.

She was not at all surprised when Claude Pickard came in later in the day.

"Just wanted to tell you how sorry I am to hear the news about the scabies in your herds," he said unctuously.

"But you must be awfuly glad I changed my mind about selling to you," she said.

"Frankly, I am. Of course it may not be so bad as Verne thinks, but we certainly can't afford to pay anything like what we offered originally."

"Oh, I'm sure you couldn't," Dale said, and presently Pickard went away, having dropped the suggestion that he would still be interested in buying, at a greatly reduced price.

IMMEDIATELY, Dale called Ivan BUTTS into her office. The old man had been ready to weep over the bad news all morning. She said, "I've got to find a new manager. Do you know of a good sheep man who would be capable of handling a job of that kind?"

"You mean you're going to fire Verne Hull?" he asked, amazed.

"I've got to. Not altogether because he must have been careless to let our sheep get scab in the first place, but because he wants to buy the outfit, and it stands to reason he'll do what he can to beat down the price."

Ivan's eyes widened. "You mean you think he might have got the sheep infected on purpose?" he gasped.

"I wouldn't say that, certainly not without some proof. But if he and Pickard can make it look as if I'm going broke anyway, it would be to their advantage."

"Well, yes, I can see that."

"Do you know of anyone capable of taking Hull's place?"

Ivan scratched his bald head. "Only one man I can think of," he said. "That's Austin Tewkes. He's about the best foreman on the outfit, and he's pretty well educated."

"I want you to—no, I'll ride out tomorrow and talk to him. I want to see how things look myself," she declared.

Dale had often traveled over the range with her father, and his black-topped one-seater buggy was still in a shed behind the barn, and his buggy team, a pair of handsome roans called Cub and Sneezer, was still in the barn.

Next morning she had the man who took care of the barn hitch up the team, and put her saddle and a sleeping bag in the back of the buggy. Her father had always traveled that way, and if he needed to travel on horseback the Cub horse was good.

She had never had any fear of the bearded, sourdough-splotched men who herded the sheep, but to be on the safe side she carried a small blunt-nosed bulldog revolver in the pocket of her jacket.

She saw various herds along the way, but she didn't stop until she had driven twenty miles into the heart of the sheep range, after crossing a divide and striking the headwaters of a large stream known as Bullpen Creek. Many smaller streams flowed into this from the west, and a few from the east. The east side of the creek was largely lambing range for sheep; the west, cattle range.

It was true that many flocks, mostly those belonging to the Eustace outfit, did lamb on the west side, more particularly to the north, but they always moved out before the first of June, and cattle from Rock Creek moved in. It was all free government land, and the sheep had never overgrazed it so that it was unfit for cattle. To this was due the fact that there had never been serious difficulty here between sheep and cattlemen.

Before sheep had ever entered the country, a big nomadic cattle outfit had controlled all the range, and their headquarters had been on Bullpen Creek. They had given it the name because of the fenced pastures in which at certain times of the year they kept their bulls. The Seventy outfit maintained its summer camp at an isolated ranch on Bullpen, and Burr Chandler's J Bar K camp was some twelve or fifteen miles to the north.

So much of the geography of the range was known to Dale, and she knew, too, that Verne Hull had established his camp on the west side of Bullpen, near the mouth of a smaller stream known as Sunday Creek. This, of course, was her destination, but she was amazed to see the number of camps on the west side.

There was a considerable mountain range between Bullpen Creek and Rock River, and this was the summer range of the cattle outfits. Much of it was still under snow, and so was seldom used by sheep, which always pulled out for the summer.

Dale wasn't fooled. This was the range on which Verne Hull had established the herds suspected of having scabies, and they would be quarantined there practically all summer. It would ruin the range for cattle that year, and meant trouble with both Seventy and J Bar K if they remained under their present ownership. A range war was the last thing she wanted, but there was nothing she could do about it.

SHE STOPPED at one or two camps on her way to ask directions to Verne Hull's headquarters camp, and the herders, though polite, looked at her strangely. She hadn't yet seen any of the old herders she knew.

Then she met a horseman she knew, but it was Lafe Hargood, a Seventy rider who had been at Seventy the three days she had been there. The man pulled up and looked his surprise when he saw her.

"Ain't you a long way from home, Miss Eustace?" he asked.

"I've been here before," she replied. "What are you doing over here? I don't see any cattle."

"We ain't crossed over yet," he said. "Sure a hell of a lot of sheep on our range. They all belong to you?"

"I'm afraid so. Mr. Leatherwood hasn't sold Seventy yet?"

"Not that I know of. I was talking to Verne Hull the other day and he said he was still angling for it. You sheep people buy, it looks like I'd be out of a job."

She talked with him a few minutes and drove on. It seemed to her that Hargood was on pretty good terms with her manager, for a cowpuncher.

It was long after noon before she reached Hull's camp, but Hull and several other men were there: Bill Cowdery, the commissary man, and a couple of campmovers. A horseshoe game was in progress. Hull said something to them, and the campmovers quickly vanished.

"This is a surprise," Hull said. "Have you had anything to eat?"

"No, but I brought my lunch and oats for the team," Dale said. "If you'll have one of the men feed them—"

"Certainly. Bill, take care of Miss Eustace's team. Rube, get busy and make her some dinner. Can't have our lady boss setting down to a cold lunch." Hull smiled. "Slack time right now, so the boys were having a little recreation."

"So I noticed," Dale said as she climbed down. "I used to be pretty good at horseshoes myself." The men looked relieved. This indicated that she was in a good humor.

"It's chilly out here," Hull said. "I've got a fire in my tent. Won't you come in?"

DALE FOLLOWED him into the tent. A sheet-iron stove gave off a comfortable glow. There was a collapsible desk, several folding chairs, a cot and several expensive looking pieces of luggage in the tent. Verne Hull was a man who liked his comfort.

Dale accepted one of the chairs, and Hull sat on the other side of his desk. "The range looks good this spring," he said.

"For us, maybe. Not so good for the cattle that will have to use it later," she replied.

"I'm not worrying about them. Are you?"

"Yes. My father got along with the cowmen, so there never was any trouble."

"If we make it completely sheep range there won't be any trouble either." He smiled.

Dale said, "I don't think we see eye to eye about that, and a lot of other things, Verne."

"Such as—" He was eying her warily.

"It's not necessary to go into that. You and Claude Pickard are trying to buy me out. It's practically a partnership between you, and I don't believe in divided loyalty. I'm looking for a new manager," she announced.

He wasn't expecting that, and his cheeks flushed a little, but he asked composedly, "Anybody particular in mind?"

"I was thinking of Austin Tewkes."

He appeared to weigh his words. "A right good man, Austin. Plenty of experience. Of course, this bowls me over, but I don't believe you could get a better man to take my place. I was hoping—"

"What?" she asked as he hesitated.

"To stay on until you became better acquainted with me. I could break off with Pickard any time. This has nothing to do with business, but I've been crazy about you, Dale, ever since the first time I saw you."

She was astounded. "Is this a proposal of marriage?" she asked.

"Not exactly, but I've always hoped I'd get enough encouragement to get around to it."

"Now I know that I've got to get a new manager," she said.

"You find me repugnant?" There was an ugly note in his voice.

"Not physically, but you'd be wasting your time trying to court me. I wonder if you would send a man after Mr. Tewkes, or is he too far?"

"He's not far away. I could get him here before dark."

He went outside to talk to Bill Cowdery, and presently his bodyguard rode away. There was no more talk of sentiment when he returned. They talked about range mat-

ALL EYES ARE ON—

the New Issue of

AMERICA'S EXCITING PICTURE MAGAZINE

•

Packed with Up-to-the-Minute Photos and Features

•

GET YOUR COPY TODAY!

Only 15c at All Stands

ters, and he confirmed her guess that the scabby herds would have to be quarantined on the cattle range.

Dale didn't know just how it came to her, but she got the feeling that this man was dangerous. As yet she didn't associate it with physical danger. She meant to spend the night here, and it didn't occur to her to be afraid. But she sensed a cat and mouse attitude, and knew that in Hull's mind she was the mouse.

Austin Tewkes arrived well before sundown, a certain eagerness in his round, fleshy face that he couldn't conceal. Obviously he knew why he had been summoned, and he was ingratiating both to Dale and Hull.

Dale said, "Mr. Tewkes, would you like to take over as temporary manager of the sheep."

"Temporary?" His face fell.

"If you make good the job will be permanent, of course," she said. "If not you will be drawing twice the money you are now. Of course, you won't have as much responsibility as Mr. Hull has had, but you'll have complete charge of range matters."

Tewkes replied, "I wouldn't want to take Verne's job away from him. He's a good man—"

"I've recommended you," Hull said shortly.

"In that case I'd be glad to have the job," Tewkes said.

When it came time to retire Hull insisted that Dale use his tent and cot. She accepted the tent, but used her own sleeping bag.

As she was trying to get to sleep a wild and foolish thought came to her. Hull and Pickard wanted badly to buy the sheep. If anything was to happen to her, and she should die, her only heir, an aged aunt her father had always taken care of, would have no knowledge of the business and would be only too glad to sell. With scab in the flocks the partners would be able to get them for no more than half what they would have to pay her. It would be, practically, a steal for them.

For one of the few times in her life, she knew what it was to be afraid.

SO FAR AS Burr Chandler could see, things were going along in a perfectly normal manner. Seventy still belonged to the Leatherwoods, and relations between the two outfits were once more normal. It was true that Dick still avoided him, but he didn't mind this in the least.

A couple of days after Dale had gone back to Chub Springs, Burr had occasion to go to Topaz, and there he got the good news from Abe Dollenmeyer that he was starting a bank.

"It should be in operation in sixty days, and I want to tell you that you can borrow all the money you want," Dollenmeyer beamed.

That was the best news Burr had heard. His thoughts were lighter by ninety per cent when he rode out on the range next day.

The cattle were doing all right on the reservation, but he met Ben Tobey, chief of Indian police, a full-blooded Indian, and a good friend of his, who said, "Right away you must get cows off reservation."

"It's earlier than we figured, Ben, but if you say so we'll do our best."

"Too long time white man use Injun range for nothing. Next time have to pay."

"Well, I wouldn't mind that," Burr said. "I'm willing to pay a reasonable rent for what I use."

"Can't do. Agent him say lease all reservation this side of mountain."

"I don't savvy."

Ben Tobey shrugged. "Me no savvy either. Agent say Injun get more money. Say next year no more white man's cows up here."

Burr could get no more out of him. Either Tobey knew no more than he had said, or wouldn't talk about it, and the news was disquieting. If this early spring and late fall range was lost, and sheep crowded in from the other side, the Rock River cowmen would be squeezed like an accordion.

He stayed at camp that night, and rode over Trail Creek Pass the next morning to the Bullpen range. He expected to see sheep, but not in the numbers that obviously were there.

Presently he saw two riders coming his way and he built a smoke and waited. He expected them to be sheepherders, and he hoped they would be someone in authority. He had something to say to them.

They had disappeared in the brush of a canyon, and he didn't see them again until they were almost upon him. He got a jolt when he recognized Dale Eustace and Austin Tewkes. Dale was just as surprised as he when he rode out in front of them.

"Burr!" she exclaimed, calling him by his first name for the first time. "This is a surprise."

"It's mutual," he said. He looked at Tewkes. "Claiming just a little more territory than you're entitled to, aren't you, Tewkes?" he demanded.

"It's free graze, I believe," Tewkes said insolently.

"You aiming to lamb all these herds up here?"

"That's right."

"Let me tell you something. You're at least four miles over the line you're supposed to stay back of, and you've got twice as many sheep on the rest as you're supposed to have. You're going to have a mighty small lamb crop if you don't move back and scatter out," Burr grated.

HE WAS keenly aware of Dale's presence, aware that she owned the sheep, but he had been gathering anger all day, and the sight of Tewkes's smug face infuriated him. Now, so far as Dale was concerned, he was a cowman first, a gentleman later.

Tewkes said coldly, "We're here to stay, Chandler. If we need more range we'll take it."

Burr smiled thinly. "Have you forgotten the mules, Tewkes?"

Tewkes flushed. "We'll be ready for your damned mules next time, and we'll shoot every animal you drive through one of our herds."

"Wait a minute," Dale said. "I don't like the attitude of either one of you. These sheep belong to me."

"Sorry, Dale," Burr said. "To me, sheep are sheep. This is my range and Tewkes knows it as well as I do. Long as I'm in business I stand up for my rights."

Her face didn't change expression, and he couldn't know that, far from being angry at his attitude, she approved of him.

Tewkes said, "Look here, Chandler, I'm running this outfit now, and you can't scare me, and you can't bully Miss Eustace."

Dale said, "Will you ride on a little way, Mr. Tewkes? I want to talk to Mr. Chandler." The new manager hesitated in some confusion, then rode on up the trail for a hundred yards, where he stopped and waited.

"What did he say about him running the outfit?" Burr asked.

"That's right. I hired him to take Verne Hull's place last night."

"You fired Hull?"

"In a way. Since he's trying to buy me out there was an outside chance he might just not mind too much if I got into some trouble."

"If you ask me, I think he'll still be running the outfit," he said frankly.

Dale looked startled. "Tewkes has been a good man," she defended. "He worked for my father more than ten years."

Burr didn't care to pursue the argument. "You'll have to move a lot of sheep out of here, Dale," he said stolidly.

Her face began to burn. She had never taken orders from anybody. If only he knew, she thought. She was all that stood between him and bankruptcy, and here he was giving her orders as if she were an underling.

She said, "I don't like being threatened."

"You expect me to beg?" he demanded. "Or quietly go broke?"

"You might listen to our side of it."

"Which is?"

"We've got scabies in our flocks. We don't know how many herds are affected, but until we do know, we've got to keep the sheep where they are."

"Scab! I know about that. I mean I know what it means. But why bring it up here?" In a flash he realized what would happen if the sheep were quarantined on his range.

"That was one of the reasons I dis-

charged Verne Hull," she said. "But now that they're here, what can I do?"

He was stumped. It was incredible that cattle outfits could go broke because of a disease peculiar to sheep. But it could happen.

"Makes it nice," he said grimly.

"They may not all be infected. We'll move those that are not," Dale promised.

Burr smiled at her. "Sorry to be acting like a wounded bear," he said. "I know it's not your fault, but it's pretty crimping to have to fight against a woman—that I'd like to have as a friend."

"I am your friend, Burr," she said softly.

They had stopped their horses side by side, and it seemed to him she had swayed toward him, and her red lips were parted. Before he knew it he had reached out, caught her in his arms and kissed her.

He was surprised that she didn't struggle; even more surprised to feel her lips gently responding to his kiss.

He held her a moment, then pushed her gently back into the saddle. He started to apologize but she said rapidly, "What if Tewkes saw that? Or, worse, what if your friend, Mrs. Pickard, had seen it?"

"Leona? Why—what difference would that make?" he asked. "She's married."

"But very much in love with you," she said. "And I suspect you are with her."

He didn't finish the denial he'd started to make. He had tried to fall out of love with Leona, but it hadn't been easy. Maybe he was still in love with her, he didn't know.

"I'm sorry I got fresh," he said. "Tewkes will be tired of waiting, and I've got to be getting back to the ranch."

"Are you going back the way you came?"

"No, I'll head over the divide in a couple of miles and go down Willie Creek."

They parted, and when Dale overtook Austin Tewkes she knew at once by the look on his face that he had been spying through the brush, and had seen the kiss. But he didn't mention it.

BURR CUT into Willie Creek, a tributary of Rock River, a couple of hours later. His mind was still confused over the happenings of the day. He seemed to be facing certain ruin because of the Eustace sheep, and yet he had kissed the owner of those sheep, and she had seemed to like it. He was a man who liked to know where he stood, and he had never been more up in the air.

He had ridden only a little way when he heard someone coming down the trail behind him at a rapid trot. He had out in from a fork of the creek, and whoever was coming had crossed the divide further south. Half out of courtesy and half out of curiosity, he reined to the side of the trail and waited.

The rider was Dick Leatherwood, and his face was pasty and glazed from fright. When the fellow saw Burr he jerked his horse to a halt, and tried to compose his features, but the effort was a flat failure.

"Hello, Dick," Burr said. "You look in considerable of an uproar. What's up?"

"Not a thing, not a thing," Dick denied. "You—you just surprised me, I guess."

"That so? We've met unexpectedly a lot of times before without you looking like a ghost was on your tail. Where you been?"

"Nowhere. Just riding around."

"Quite a few sheep on our range, looks like."

"That so? Oh, sure. More than usually."

Dick Leatherwood wasn't concerned with sheep. Something else had happened, and Burr felt that he had vital interest in knowing what it was. More than anyone else Dick was to blame for the threat that hung over the cattlemen. And Burr still deeply resented the thing Dick was doing to Annie and George, whom he still counted as among his best friends.

"Hold on a minute," Burr said, as Dick showed signs of wanting to ride off and leave him. "I think you and me are going to have a talk."

"Some other time, unless you want to talk at a fast trot," Dick said. "I'm in a hurry."

Burr caught the other's man' bridle rein. "We're going to talk right here, Richard," he said coldly. "What have Hull and Pickard got on you to make George sell Seventy to 'em for a song to save your yellow-livered hide?"

Stormily, Dick made as if to reach for his gun, but Burr's free hand descended on the handle of the gun before he could touch it.

"Let go my bridle," Dick demanded.

"Don't ever reach to draw a gun on me, Richard, without you intending to use it," Burr said. "What have they got on you?"

"Not a damned thing. We're selling because we want to."

"George turned down forty thousand to sell for probably ten. Mean to tell me he *wants* to do that?"

He knew by the startled look on the other's face that his random statement of ten thousand had hit the mark.

"Keep your big nose out of my business," Dick said, like an angry child.

"Happens to be my business too, because if you sell Seventy I go broke. I asked what have they got on you?"

"Nothing."

SUDDENLY Burr's hand let go of the gun handle and fastened on the other man's collar. He swung down and jerked Dick out of the saddle with him. Dick reached frantically for the gun this time, but just as he touched it, Burr's other fist caught him under the jaw. His knees buckled and he grabbed at the arm holding him by the collar. His eyes were glassy.

Burr held him until his eyes cleared. "Out with it," he said grimly, "or I'll beat you within an inch of your life. Come clean, my friend."

[*Turn page*]

ALBUM OF AMERICA'S FAVORITE COWBOYS

JIM HATFIELD

Fighting Ranger of the Lone Star State

Featured in Every Issue of

TEXAS RANGERS

WAYNE MORGAN

Valiant Quick-Trigger Robin Hood of the Range

In Novels Featured Every Issue of

MASKED RIDER WESTERN

BOB PRYOR

A Battling Hero of the Pioneer West

Featured in Novels Every Issue of

THE RIO KID WESTERN

STEVE REESE

Cleverest and Bravest of Cattle Country Detectives

Starring in Every Issue of

RANGE RIDERS WESTERN

BUY THESE MAGAZINES AT YOUR FAVORITE NEWSSTAND!

"I won't talk," Dick said sullenly.

Burr had gone too far to stop now. He hit the fellow right in the mouth. He let go the collar and drove his fist into Dick's belly, and stretched him flat with another punch to the jaw. Dick lay there, not trying to get up.

Dick Leatherwood had alway talked a good fight. He was as heavy as Burr, if not so tall. Burr had long known, however, that Dick was yellow.

Burr said harshly, "Get up. You're not even hurt."

"I won't," Dick said.

Burr drew his gun from the holster and tossed it to one side while Dick lay there watching him. Then he unbuckled his gun belt and held it by the tail end.

He said grimly, "I'm going to work you over with this belt buckle until you tell me what I want to know. Annie can fry your face for hash when you get home."

Loaded with cartridges as it was it was a formidable weapon. Burr had no intention of using it on the fellow's face, but it would hurt badly enough around the body. He saw desperation on the man's face, and a certain cunning. He had thrown his own gun away, and Dick was still armed. Dick got slowly to one knee, then dived away from Burr, hand slapping at his gun.

Dick's hat had fallen off when he fell. Burr leaped and swung the heavy belt. The buckle came down on the back of Dick's head, cutting a gash, and knocking him on his face.

"I thought you'd try that," Burr said, and planted a foot on the man's gun arm. He bent over and removed the gun from the holster and tossed it over where his own weapon lay.

"Now we're on even terms," Burr said. "Get up and take off your own belt if you want to, for we're going to have this out. One of us is going to be a mighty sick man unless you decide to talk."

Dick turned over and sat up. His face was white. "You expect me to get myself hanged?" he asked forlornly.

"Hanged?" Burr was taken aback. He hadn't looked for anything as bad as that.

"That's right, hanged," Dick moaned. "A man was killed over at old man Cuthbert's deadfall last night, and they claim I done it."

"Who was killed?"

"Some sheepherder. Name's Morgan, I think. But I didn't kill him."

"Then what're you afraid of?"

"They say I did. Sam Cuthbert, his two boys, Bill Cowdery and Verne Hull."

Burr knew all about Cuthbert's deadfall, a place ten miles east of Bullpen Creek where lonesome shepherders were frequently drugged and robbed.

"What were you doing there?" he asked. "You're supposed to be riding the reservation."

ME AND Lafe Hargood rode over yesterday. We got to drinking and got in a poker game. Cuthbert told us the sheepherder Morgan was loaded with money. Hull and Cowdery came in late and got in the game. I don't know what happened after that. Seems to me I passed out around midnight. Didn't wake up till noon, and they told me I had killed this sheepherder without cause. He'd been shot twice, and two shells in my gun were empty."

"Where's Lafe Hargood?"

"They said he had left, but they said he saw me shoot Morgan," Dick said miserably.

"All right, go on with the story," Burr ordered.

"Cuthbert took the body to Chub Springs. He was going to say that it happened in a fight, and the sheepherder was to blame. But unless me and George sold the Seventy before tomorrow morning, Hull and the others would say that I didn't give the man a chance. That's why I was in such a hurry. Old Sam would just claim he told a lie because he was scared," Dick said.

Burr realized that the scheme would work, and he knew that George Leatherwood would not hesitate a minute to save his brother.

"Might just as well tell me the rest of it," he said. "What did they have on you before?"

"I raised a check, or they claim I did. I was drunk that time too. Now I don't believe I did either one."

All Burr had to do, he knew, was keep Dick from going home. If George wasn't in Chub Springs before morning they would have to accuse him of the murder, or the frame-up would fail. He had no means of knowing what they would do, but he did know what George Leatherwood would do if Dick got to him. George would kill a horse getting there to save Dick's neck.

"I know you hate me," Dick whined, "but George and Annie are your friends. For their sake let me go now."

Burr hesitated. If he yielded, the Seventy was lost, and he couldn't fight against treachery in his own dooryard. The cowardly murder of an unsuspecting sheepherder would go unavenged.

On the other hand, he didn't believe for a moment that Dick Leatherwood had the nerve to murder a man, drunk or sober. And Dick would be pretty certain to hang if his enemies carried out their bluff. It was a hard decision to make.

"All right," he said finally, "go ahead and sell your soul."

After Leatherwood had ridden away, Burr buckled on his belt, mounted his horse and rode back the other way.

SOME TIME during the night Burr put his horse in a livery stable in Chub Springs and got a room in the hotel. He was down in the Senate Saloon as soon as it opened up, from where he kept a close watch on the street. Posey Mitchell never arrived before noon, so he had no one to talk to, and paced back and forth.

Half an hour before the bank was to open he saw the Leatherwood brothers tie their horses to the hitchrack in front of the saloon and come in. Dick was wearing a bandage across the back of his head, and Burr had a momentary regret that he had used violence on the fellow.

They stopped dead inside the door when they saw him, and fear clouded their eyes. "What're you doing here?" George demanded aggressively.

[*Turn page*]

BE SURE TO READ THE GALA SUMMER ISSUE

of

THRILLING RANCH STORIES

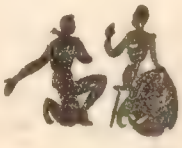
•

Featuring

FORBIDDEN WOMAN
By JOSEPH CHADWICK

BUGLES AT MIDNIGHT
By BEN SMITH

and many other novelettes and short stories by your favorite writers



NOW ON SALE

25c PER COPY AT ALL STANDS

"Just curious to see how a man looks when he sells his friends down the river," Burr answered.

"Look here," George said dangerously, "you try to interfere in my business again and I'll kill you. If you say anything about what Dick told you yesterday—"

"When you try to scare me, George, you make it absolutely necesary for me to tell what I know," Burr cut in.

"I've got nothing to say to you," George said, and they strode past him and up to the bar where they ordered whisky.

Burr continued to stand by the door, and when finally they left the saloon and started toward the bank, he swung in alongside George.

"I told you I'd kill you, and I meant it," George muttered.

"Get some sense into your heads," Burr retorted. "Dick was framed. Some day we'll be able to prove it, and maybe you'll get your ranch back. You'll need a witness to the deal, and I'm ready to go in with you."

"Don't listen to him, George," Dick pleaded.

"You'd just have 'em down on you," George said.

"They already are."

"All I ask is that you leave us alone and keep your mouth shut."

"You won't let me go in with you?"

"No."

"Then I don't keep my mouth shut," Burr told them. He stopped, and they walked on.

Presently he saw Pickard and Hull walking from Pickard's home, and they saw him. They joined the Leatherwoods and disappeared inside the bank. Burr walked rapidly over to Pickard's house and knocked on the door.

"Burr!" Leona exclaimed. "What are you doing here? Come in."

"I hate to enter Pickard's house, but I've got to talk to you," he said.

"I'm washing dishes. Won't you come into the kitchen and have a cup of coffee?"

"Go on with your chores. I'd sooner talk in the kitchen, but omit the coffee."

"You're still bitter, aren't you?"

"Maybe. Look, George and Dick Leatherwood are in the bank now selling Seventy to your husband and Hull for ten thousand dollars. Know why?"

"No. I don't. If true, it's a steal."

"It's blackmail. Somebody raised a check and blamed it on Dick. When that wasn't enough they murdered a man and blamed it on him. Now they've promised to swear it was self-defense if they get the ranch."

"How do you know that?" she asked.

"I beat it out of Dick," he said grimly.

"Dick is no good. He could be lying."

"He's not a murderer either."

"Who murdered the man?" she asked.

"Hull and his man Cowdery were there."

"You think Claude knew about it?" she asked with a strained face.

"Form your own conclusions."

"What—what will this do to you?" she asked, wetting her dry lips with her tongue.

"Break me, I suppose. That's the general idea."

"What do you think I should do?"

"Nothing that I know of, except answer a question. Does Jacques Duclos know what he's putting up money for?"

"I don't think so. He has complete confidence in Claude."

"Well, I'll be going now," he said. "Some day I hope to prove what I told you. When and if I do the roof may cave in on your husband. I wanted you to be warned."

"Burr, I hate him," she burst out. "Say the word and I'll do anything."

"Good-by, Leona," he said, and got out as hurriedly as he could. He felt terribly sorry for her, but he had troubles enough now without getting involved emotionally with a married woman.

HE WAS standing in front of the Senate when the Leatherwoods came to get their horses. Both of them looked like dogs who had been whipped. Without entering the saloon for a drink they climbed upon their horses and were turning away when Burr called to them.

"Sold out?" he asked, his voice conveying more than the mere words.

"We did," George replied.

Burr walked over to the hitchrack. "You know I'm slightly interested," he told them.

"What about the cattle? You getting them off the range?"

"Not yet," George said reluctantly. "We agreed to run them till they want to bring in sheep."

"You mean you sold the cattle along with the ranch for a measly ten thousand?" Burr asked incredulously.

"It was a separate deal. We had a chattel mortgage on the stock to be taken care of."

They might have gotten a little extra for the cattle, but Burr doubted it. What was important to him was that they were going to handle the cattle for Pickard and Hull for the time being, and if he ran his cattle with Seventy as he had always done, he would in a sense be working with his worst enemies. It was an impossible situation.

He watched the men ride away, and although he expected to travel the same road he had no wish to ride with them. In Dick he had a vicious enemy now, even though anything Burr might accomplish would really help them.

Standing in front of the saloon he saw Verne Hull walking toward the livery stable, and with long, determined steps Burr strode in the same direction.

Hull's horse was just being led out when Burr arrived. Hull had the look of a cornered coyote when he saw Burr, and his hand moved ever so slightly toward his gun, then came back. Hating the cowman though he did, he wasn't ready yet for that kind of a showdown.

"Well, I hear you're in the cattle business, Hull," Burr said.

"Any objections?" Hull challenged.

"You look better behind sheep, but we've got to make some arrangements. I don't want my cows contaminated by anything you own. There's approximately as much range east of the divide as there is on the west. You can have one side, and I'll take the other. Let the stableman here flip a coin for choice. Do you want heads or tails?" Burr asked.

"I take heads," Hull said promptly.

The stableman flipped a coin high in the air, and it came down with the head up. "I

[*Turn page*]

SELL Christmas Cards
PRINTED WITH SENDER'S NAME
LESS THAN 3¢ EACH
Make $65.00 CASH on only 50 orders by Amazing Double-up Plan. Sell *Personal* Christmas Cards printed with Sender's Name for less than 3c each. No experience needed. 30 SAMPLES FREE! Albums of 36 styles—all actual cards—Free. Also big Special box Assortments sent on approval. Designs include Religious, Humorous, Artistic and Business. Big season now. Send no money! Samples Free. Rush name on postcard.
GENERAL CARD CO., 1300 W. Jackson, Dept. 70-P, Chicago 7, Ill.

LAW
STUDY AT HOME Legally trained men win higher positions and bigger success in business and public life. Greater opportunities now than ever before. More Ability: More Prestige: More Money We guide you step by step. You can train at home during spare time. Degree of LL.B. We furnish all text material, including 14-volume Law Library. Low cost, easy terms. Get our valuable 48-page "Law Training for Leadership" and "Evidence" books FREE. Send NOW.
LASALLE EXTENSION UNIVERSITY, 417 South Dearborn Street
A Correspondence Institution Dept. 9329L Chicago 5, Ill.

RUPTURED?
Get Relief This Proven Way
Why try to worry along with trusses that gouge your flesh—press heavily on hips and spine—enlarge opening—fail to hold rupture? You need the Cluthe. No leg-straps or cutting belts. Automatic adjustable pad holds at real opening—follows every body movement with instant increased support in case of strain. Cannot slip whether at work or play. Light. Waterproof. Can be worn in bath. Send for amazing FREE book, "Advice To Ruptured," and details of liberal truthful 60-day trial offer. Also endorsements from grateful users in your neighborhood. Write:
CLUTHE SONS, Dept. 33, Bloomfield, New Jersey

QUIT TOBACCO!
Remove all tobacco craving safely in every form and join the thousands who have completely obtained satisfactory freedom from tobacco with the old genuine TOBACCO BANISHER. Send for FREE BOOKLET describing the ill effects of tobacco, and a safe reliable home method. A proven success for 40 years.
GUSTAF H. GUSTAFSON CO.
Box 168, Dept. TF. Dalhart, Texas

COMPLETE New FALSE PLATE IN 24 HOURS FROM YOUR OLD

NOW LOW AS . . . $13.95
Brand new process transforms your old, broken, cracked or loose plates into new lightweight plastic plates.
NO IMPRESSION NEEDED
Let us help you enjoy life again. You will marvel at this revolutionary new method. Using your own old plates, we will remake them completely in only 24 hours. Missing teeth are carefully matched and replaced. Work is done on an absolute MONEY BACK GUARANTEE.
SEND NO MONEY —Just rush your name and address to us for full FREE DETAILS. If your teeth are loose, we'll tell you how to tighten them before duplication. Act now. Quit suffering!
Tru-Grip Dental Labs, 7th Fl., 127 N. Dearborn, Dept. 764 Chicago 2, Ill.

Free Yourself FROM Tobacco Habit

If you want to stop smoking and just can't, try world-famous NO-TO-BAC Lozenges. See how quickly NO-TO-BAC may help stop your craving for tobacco. Rush $1 to NO-TO-BAC, for 7 days supply. (For heavy smokers—16 days' supply—$2.) Satisfaction guaranteed or money back. Write:

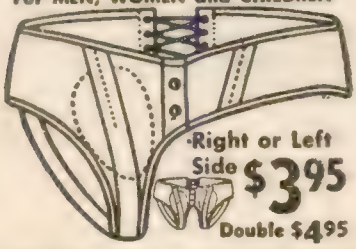
NO-TO-BAC CO.
DEPT. S HEWLETT, NEW YORK

BE A DETECTIVE
WORK HOME or TRAVEL. Experience unnecessary. DETECTIVE Particulars FREE. Write GEO. T. H. WAGNER, 125 W. 86th St., N. Y.

ACCOUNTANT
BECOME AN EXPERT

Executive Accountants and C. P. A's earn $4,000 to $10,000 a year. Thousands of firms need them. We train you thoroly at home in spare time for C. P. A's examinations or executive accounting positions. Previous experience unnecessary. Personal training under supervision of staff of C. P. A's. Placement counsel and help. Write for free book, "Accountancy, the Profession That Pays."
LASALLE Extension University, 417 So. Dearborn St.
A Correspondence Institution Dept. 9329H Chicago 5, Ill.

AMAZING COMFORT — NO SPECIAL FITTING
RUPTURE-EASER
Reg. in U.S. Pat. Off. (A Piper Brace Product)
For MEN, WOMEN and CHILDREN



Right or Left Side $3.95
Double $4.95

A strong, form fitting washable support. Back lacing adjustable. Snaps up in front. Adjustable leg strap. Soft, flat groin pad. No steel or leather bands. Unexcelled for comfort. Also used as after operation support. Mail orders give measure around the lowest part of the abdomen and state right or left side or double. We Prepay Postage Except on C.O.D.'s.

Over 400,000 Satisfied Users! 10 Day Trial Offer
Money-back guarantee if you don't get blessed relief
Delay may be serious — ORDER TODAY!
PIPER BRACE CO.
811 Wyandotte Dept. TF-92 Kansas City 6, Mo.

BE A *Nurse*
MAKE $50-$60 A WEEK

Practical nurses are needed in every community...doctors rely on them... patients appreciate their cheerful, expert care. You can learn practical nursing at home in spare time. Course endorsed by physicians. 53rd yr. Earn while learning. High School not required. Men, women, 18 to 60. Trial plan. Write now!
CHICAGO SCHOOL OF NURSING
Dept. 429, 41 East Pearson Street, Chicago 11, Ill.
Please send free booklet, and 16 sample lesson pages.
Name.....
City.....*State*.....*Age*.....

win!" Hull said in a triumphant voice.

"All right. Which side of the range do you want?"

Hull considered. Burr knew that the east side was by far the best summer range, and there was more of it, and Hull was aware of it as he was.

Still the man hesitated.

And then, just as Burr had guessed that he would, he finally said, "I'll take the west side."

"Okay. See that you keep your stuff on your own side of the divide," Burr said shortly.

He knew that Hull had made his choice because the east side would be overrun with sheep, and because there Burr would be wedged in between the sheep on one side and the Seventy cattle on the other.

Undoubtedly Hull and Pickard intended to sell the cattle early, and there would be grass enough on the west side, if they were compelled to keep them there, to last until they were ready to introduce sheep.

But had Burr won the choice, he would still have chosen the range he had got. If he had to fight, he wanted it to be for something worth while.

"There's one other thing, Hull," he said. "You and your pardner murdered a man to get hold of Seventy. Some day I'm going to pin it on you."

"That's a lie," Hull blustered. "You were lucky enough to beat me the other day, but you can't do it again. Take off that gun, and we'll settle this once and for all." With a grandiose gesture he unbuckled his gun belt and hung it on a peg.

"Put it back," Burr said composedly. "I see no point in licking you twice. There's a murder between us now, and I'm out to get you hanged, so you had better hold onto your gun."

THE STABLEMAN'S eyes bagged out as he listened. This was war talk with a vengeance. Until a few days ago Verne Hull had been pretty much cock of the walk in Chub Springs, and now he was being called a murderer by the man who had whipped him.

SHEEP HEIRESS

The stableman leaped back out of the way as Hull turned and reached for his gun belt. He expected fireworks, but none developed.

Hull swung the heavy belt about his waist and buckled it with a sudden swift gesture, but didn't move to touch the gun. Burr Chandler stood at ease and ready, and Hull was not bent on risking his life on even terms.

The sheepman had been caught off guard by Burr's blunt announcement, for he had had no hint that Dick Leatherwood had told anyone except his brother how pressure had been put upon him. As a matter of fact, Dick had explained the bandage on his head by claiming a horse had fallen with him.

But Verne Hull knew now that he would never be safe until this enemy was destroyed. He mounted his horse and rode away without taking time for a backward look.

(To be continued in the next issue)

TEAMWORK FOR CIVIL DEFENSE

THE drop of a single atom bomb on the United States by an enemy may create the gravest emergency we have ever faced. Americans have faced emergencies before—floods, hurricanes, explosions, wrecks—and they have learned that the way to deal with them is through teamwork. Teamwork has long been an American tradition.

Today, the key for community survival is teamwork on a house-by-house, block-by-block, city-by-city, and state-by-state basis.

Every citizen should belong to the civil defense team. The part each plays, no matter how small, is an important link in the survival pattern.

Go to your local Civil Defense headquarters and volunteer as a warden, rescue worker, auxiliary policeman, first-aid corpsman, staff worker. But whatever duty you have, *stick with it.*

17,500,000 volunteers are needed. Do your part for Civil Defense.

BORROW $50 TO $500.00 by mail

CASH IN A HURRY MAIL TODAY

If you need cash FOR ANY PURPOSE . . . you may BORROW $50 to $500, regardless of where you live . . . entirely by mail . . . FAST, CONFIDENTIAL service. NO CO-SIGNERS! NO INQUIRIES made of employers, friends, or tradespeople! SOLVE YOUR MONEY PROBLEMS, NOW! Consolidate old bills. Buy what you need and repay in convenient monthly payments to fit your income. ACT NOW! Mail coupon for a money-request application.

AMERICAN LOAN PLAN Dept. TF-8
Supervised by the State of Nebraska
219 City National Bank Bldg., Omaha 2, Nebr.

NAME.....AGE.....
ADDRESS.....OCCUPATION.....
CITY.....STATE.....

Success-Winning VOICE !

Sound like the HE-MAN you are

STRENGTHEN your voice this tested scientific way. Yes—you may now be able to improve the POWER of your speaking and singing voice . . . in the privacy of your own room! Self-training lessons, mostly silent. No music required.

FREE BOOK Write TODAY for Eugene Feuchtinger's great booklet "How to Develop a Successful Voice." It's absolutely FREE! You must state your age. Booklet mailed postpaid in plain wrapper. No salesman will call. Send your name and age RIGHT NOW!
Prefect Voice Institute, 210 S. Clinton St., Studio JY-6, Chicago 6, Ill.

FREE—Amazing Book on
RHEUMATISM, ARTHRITIS

If you suffer the aches, pains and discomforts of Rheumatism, as manifested in ARTHRITIS, NEURITIS, SCIATICA or LUMBAGO, send today for the FREE Book. It reveals important facts about why drugs and medicine give only temporary relief without removing causes. Explains fully a proven, specialized system of treatment that may save you years of distress. No obligation. Write for this FREE Book today!
BALL CLINIC, Dept. 504, Excelsior Springs, Mo.

High School Course at Home **Many Finish in 2 Years**

Go as rapidly as your time and abilities permit. Course equivalent to resident school work—prepares for college entrance exams. Standard H. S. texts supplied. Diploma. Credit for H. S. subjects already completed. Single subjects if desired. High school education is very important for advancement in business and industry and socially. Don't be handicapped all your life. Be a High School graduate. Start your training now. Free Bulletin on request. No obligation.
AMERICAN SCHOOL, Dept. H-658, Drexel at 58th, Chicago 37

When You Visit Your Favorite Newsstand, Look for the Slogan

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

ON THE COVERS OF THE MAGAZINES YOU BUY!

All the thrills of the West . . . corralled into one exciting magazine . . .

Subscribe now to Ranch Romances

16 issues only $3

Everyone who enjoys hard-hitting stories of the Old West will find a paylode of thrills in each exciting issue of RANCH ROMANCES.

Every page of RANCH ROMANCES is branded with the rip-roaring action of frontier days as hard-riding men and their glamorous women recreate the pulse-quickening drama of the untamed West. Here is the roar of blazing guns, the lurking danger of the lonely range, the smashing, surging action that leads to excitement and romance.

Yes, all the thrilling adventure of the wild West is yours when you subscribe to RANCH ROMANCES. And what's more, you'll get it at a big saving . . . because if you were to buy 16 copies individually, they'd cost you $4.00. But as a subscriber, you get them for only $3.00—a saving of a full dollar. Think of it—for only $3, less than the cost of the average book, —you get 16 issues of RANCH ROMANCES . . . more than 2200 pages of hard-hitting, pulse-quickening western reading. And remember, all RANCH ROMANCES stories are brand NEW; there's not a reprint in the entire batch.

So, fill in and mail the coupon below with $3. Do it right now to make sure you don't miss a single copy of RANCH ROMANCES.

Ranch Romances • Best Books Inc. • Dept. RR2-9 • 10 E. 40th St. • New York 16, N.Y.

Count me in, Partner! Please enter a subscription to RANCH ROMANCES in my name at the special rate of 16 issues (32 weeks) for only $3. My remittance is enclosed.

Name _____

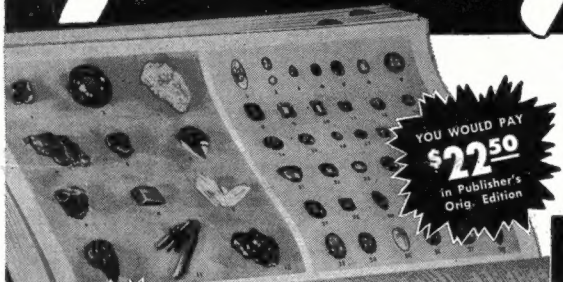
Address _____

City _____ Zone _____ State _____

THE GIANT LIBRARY-SIZE DICTIONARY YOU'VE ALWAYS DREAMED OF!

Yours Free

—as Your Gift for Joining "America's Biggest Bargain Book Club"



YOU WOULD PAY $22.50 in Publisher's Orig. Edition

BRAND NEW 1952

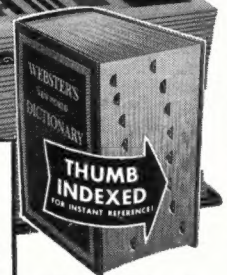
This Brand-New World WEBSTER'S ENCYCLOPEDIC DICTIONARY

OVER 2,000 GIANT PAGES! SHIPPING WT. OVER 10 LBS! More Than 140,000 Definitions! Maps! Color Plates! Complete World Atlas! Latest Official Census Figures!

JUST OFF THE PRESS — *After 10 Years of Work at a Cost of Nearly ONE MILLION DOLLARS! Latest Information on THOUSANDS of Subjects*

A DOZEN VOLUMES IN ONE
Crammed with a World of Everyday Facts On:
Forms of Address
Signs and Symbols
List of Given Names
Metric System
Constitution of U. S.
Presidents and Cabinet Officers
Dictionary of Abbreviations, etc., etc.
NEW CENSUS FIGURES
•
DICTIONARY OF SYNONYMS AND ANTONYMS
•
FULL COLOR PLATES
•
ATLAS OF THE WORLD IN FULL COLOR
UNITED NATIONS CHARTER and FLAGS OF THE UNITED NATIONS
— in full color
A Truly MAMMOTH Volume— 9" by 12" by 4½" THICK

Better Marks for Youngsters At SCHOOL!
Imagine how helpful this dictionary will be in your youngsters' school work! With this great authority, a whole treasure-chest of information will be at their fingertips — to help them get more out of their school work.



Published by World Publ. Co. and not by original publishers of Webster's Dictionary or successors.

OVER 1400 ILLUSTRATIONS

YES! This new WEBSTER'S ENCYCLOPEDIC DICTIONARY — regular price $22.50 — is yours FREE as a new membership gift from "America's Biggest Bargain Book Club"! And you get it at once!

A DOZEN Volumes in One

Over 2000 pages—the heart of everything you want to know about our language, and scores of other everyday subjects. Packed with brand-new facts about our world; its newest terms; geography, natural wonders, arts, sciences, etc. Spells, pronounces, defines over 140,000 words and phrases. Atlas of the World in **full color.** Over 1400 illustrations, maps, Metric System of Weights and Measures; latest census figures of every U.S. city, town, etc., etc.

But this amazing offer may never be repeated. So mail coupon **today!**

SEND NO MONEY! PAY POSTMAN NOTHING!

. . . You ALSO Get The 1952 Pulitzer Prize Novel THE CAINE MUTINY OR, One of These: SARACEN BLADE by Frank Yerby
•
THE PRESIDENT'S LADY by Irving Stone
•
THE CAPTIVE WITCH by Dale Van Every

1. Simply mail coupon WITHOUT MONEY — and your mammoth WEBSTER'S NEW WORLD DICTIONARY will be sent to you **immediately,** as a new membership GIFT from the Book League. Most amazing, you will **pay nothing, owe nothing** for this handsome volume — worth $22.50 in publisher's edition. WITH it will come the new 1952 Pulitzer Prize novel, "The Caine Mutiny," or any OTHER book in coupon.

2. You Choose Your Own Best-Sellers. Thereafter you will CONTINUE to receive YOUR OWN CHOICE of best-selling books by authors like Somerset Maugham, Daphne du Maurier, Van Wyck Mason, etc. You choose after reading an advance description of each book in the Club's free "Review."

3. Your Savings Are Tremendous. Although the book you select each month may be selling in publisher's edition for $3.00 or more, YOU pay only the Club's bargain price of $1.49, plus few cents for shipping — a saving of up to $1.50! Just think of the great savings you'll make on the twelve books you take during the year!

SEND NO MONEY

Just Mail Coupon Now!

Mail coupon NOW—WITHOUT MONEY—and enjoy this generous gift WITHOUT DELAY. Enjoy, too, the best-seller you select in the coupon. Then you'll realize how much pleasure you're going to get from your membership — at TREMENDOUS savings! **BOOK LEAGUE OF AMERICA, Dept. TFG-9, Garden City, N. Y.**

Mail WITHOUT MONEY to
BOOK LEAGUE OF AMERICA
Dept. TFG-9, Garden City, N. Y.

Please send me—FREE—the brand-new 1952 giant WEBSTER'S NEW WORLD DICTIONARY of the American Language, over 2,000 pages, weighing 10 lbs., containing over 140,000 definitions, 1,400 illustrations, maps, etc., and enroll me as a member. Also send me as my first Club Selection, the new best-seller I have checked below:

☐ The Caine Mutiny ☐ The President's Lady
☐ The Saracen Blade ☐ The Captive Witch

The best-selling books I choose hereafter may be either the regular Selections or any of the other popular books described in the Club's monthly "Review." Although the same titles may be selling for $3 or more in publishers' editions, I am to pay only the Club's special low members' price of $1.49 each, plus few cents shipping charges; and I may cancel my subscription at any time after buying twelve books. No dues, no further cost or obligation. **GUARANTEE:** If not delighted, I will return Dictionary and first Selection in 7 days, and this membership will be cancelled.

Mr.
Mrs. .....
Miss Please Print
Address .....
Zone No.
City .....(if any)....State.....
Slightly higher in Canada.
Address: 105 Bond St., Toronto 2

venture Book Club

FOR MEN WHO ENJOY ON . . . OFFERS YOU

FREE!

with Trial membership

ANY 3 of these Top Hit Adventure Novels

Full-Size, Full-Length, Hard-Bound Books!

Tops in Westerns! Pawnee Perez tried to forge. he was a half-breed — but the whites mistrusted him as bitterly as his red brothers hated him. Until, spurred on by a beautiful girl, he set out on a deadly mission that no man — red or white — would dare attempt! Pub. ed. $2.50.

Tops in Spy Fiction! Jan Mices worked for years with the Red underground in America, risking death to win their trust. Finally, he was sent to Moscow as a "faithful" Red, but he went with one motive: to kill the man who'd murdered his father — **Josef Stalin**! Pub. ed. $3.00.

Fast Action Thriller! The Robin Hood of modern crime is back again — battling murder, mayhem and intrigue from Hollywood to the High Sierras! Three "Saint" novelettes and seven short stories, packed with action, humor, suspense — and, of course, beautiful women! Pub. ed. $3.50.

Far East Adventure! Blazing action and violent death in the heart of Asia — where men expect the unexpected, and adventure lurks in every shadow! 12 complete tales of bandit hordes, exotic harems and man-eating beasts — by famous author-explorer! Pub. ed. $3.00.

Tops in Suspense! A famous statesman was about to be murdered—by a fanatic assassin who was officially dead and buried! Ed Mercer had to prevent it, because he knew that the killer planned to frame the murder on an innocent man — **himself**! Pub. ed. $3.00.

Frontier Best-Seller! Frontiersman, duelist, pirate — Jim Bowie slashed his way to wealth and women from gay New Orleans to the devil's own city of Natchez! They spoke his name in whispers, yet he lived to become a fabulous American hero! Pub. ed. $3.50.

MEN — here's a big Triple-Cargo of fast-moving reading entertainment — yours FREE in this sensational offer! Think of it — your choice of THREE top adventure novels —selling at retail up to $3.50 each in the publishers' editions — yours FREE with Trial Membership in the *Adventure Book Club!* We want to send you this whopping Triple-Gift (total value up to $10.00) as a heaping sample of the thrilling reading regularly offered to you by this new Book Club for Men, at big savings from regular prices!

THE BEST OF THE NEW ADVENTURE BOOKS (UP TO $3.50 IN PUB. ED.) YOURS FOR ONLY $1!

HERE'S the new kind of club for men that you've always wanted! Each month the editors of the Adventure Book Club select from the current lists of all the publishers the most exciting new novels of adventure and suspense — stories streamlined for action and guaranteed to deliver the swift-moving entertainment you want! These books sell for as much as $3.50 in the publishers' editions, but you get them for only $1 each, plus few cents shipping cost.

Relax the Way Famous Celebrities Do—With an Adventure Novel!

The Adventure Book Club chooses for you the headliners in adventure fiction — by the most famous authors — "aces" like Ernest Haycox and Luke Short, Van Wyck Mason and C. S. Forester and scores of others, in variety to satisfy every taste for thrills! Frontier novels, spy thrillers, stories of adventure in the arctic and the jungle, on land and sea and in the air!

Take as Few as Four Books A Year!

You do NOT have to accept every selection. The Club's exciting illustrated bulletin for members, "Adventure Trails," which you get FREE, describes each $1 selection in advance. If it's a book you don't want, merely notify us and we won't send it. You can accept as few as *four* books a year from at least 24 books offered.

3 BOOKS FREE — Mail Coupon Now!

Accept this Trial Membership offer and receive at once your choice of ANY THREE adventure books on this page as your FREE GIFT. With these books will come, on approval, your first regular selection at $1. If not delighted, return all four books within 7 days and your membership will be cancelled.

The Adventure Book Club, Garden City, New York

MAIL COUPON NOW!

THE ADVENTURE BOOK CLUB, Dept. 9T6, Garden City, New York

Please send me FREE the 3 Adventure Novels I have checked at the right and enroll me in the Adventure Book Club.
Also send me my first regular selection at $1, plus a few cents shipping cost. I am to receive free the Club Bulletin, "Adventure Trails," so I may decide in advance which future selections I want to accept. I need take only four books a year out of the 24 action novels that will be offered, and I pay only the bargain price of $1 each, plus few cents shipping, for books I accept.

- ☐ Bird of Prey
- ☐ Heart of Asia
- ☐ I Killed Stalin
- ☐ The Iron Mistress
- ☐ Red Blizzard
- ☐ The Second Saint Omnibus

Name .....

Address .....

City & Zone ..... State .....

(THIS OFFER GOOD ONLY IN THE U. S.)

NO-RISK GUARANTEE: If not delighted, return all books within 7 days and this membership will be cancelled.